

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR NEEDS IN MANAGING INCLUSIVE CLASSES IN INDIA

India, in common with many countries has made a commitment to the development of an education system that is more equitable and inclusive. Policies within India have emphasised the need to ensure that all children, including those with special educational needs have access to education that addresses their collective and individual needs. Many teachers in India have expressed apprehensions about an increased diversity of students entering their classrooms. This research was undertaken in four major metro cities of India (Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Bangalore and Kolkata) to understand the challenges faced by teachers in addressing the diverse needs of learners, investigate their professional development needs in relation to inclusion and propose the framework of a professional development programme. The reported investigation generated data, which has been used to discuss with teachers their perceptions of their professional needs to work effectively in inclusive classrooms. Issues of professional development curriculum challenges and the need to support teacher well-being were amongst those that emerged from the data.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Teacher professional development, Diverse learners, Policies in India, Teacher perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that inclusive education is the most reasonable, just and successful approach to educating all learners regardless of need or ability (Florian and Linklater, 2010; Forlin, 2018). International agreements (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1990; 1994), initiated discussions about the causes of marginalization, and encouraged policy makers to consider how a more equitable approach to education might be achieved. This prompted governments, including the Indian administration, to issue new policies and strategies for inclusion (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009; 2020).

Inclusive education has gained currency across the world in the last four decades, with its foundation on the premise that diversity exists in all classrooms. An inclusive ideology prioritises provision for all learners and places the responsibility on schools to reform and improve their systems, practices and methods of classroom instruction; to meet the needs of every learner. An emphasis upon the inclusion of students' special educational needs and disability has driven much of the research in this area, and continues to provide a focus for much of the work reported (Keles, Ten Braak and Munthe, 2024). It acknowledges that inclusion is more than the physical placement of students with diverse needs in mainstream classes. (Kinsella and Senior, 2008; Winter, 2006). In India, provisions for students with special educational needs are informed by policies including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), which mandates inclusive education, and schemes such as Samagra Shiksha that support resource rooms, special educators, and assistive aids in schools. However, implementation remains uneven and varies widely across states and institutions.

Sharma *et al.* (2012) have summarised studies conducted on teachers' ability to address diverse needs and contend that teacher confidence and understanding is an important determinant in making classrooms more inclusive as these perceptions impact their thoughts and actions. They also note the dearth of studies that focus on teacher efficacy in including students with diverse needs in regular classrooms. Inclusive teaching understandably requires skills and proficiency but determining these demands further investigation. Therefore, the attitudes, capabilities and training of mainstream teachers become a legitimate focus of inquiry to provide greater understanding of what constitutes an inclusive classroom.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Training teachers features prominently among the reforms listed by the EFA Global monitoring report (UNESCO, 2013-14). Singal *et al.* (2010), contend that training of mainstream teachers is one of four critical factors necessary to make

inclusive education in India a reality. This is further emphasised by researchers who have explored the challenges of developing a more inclusive approach to education in several parts of India (Sharma, Moore and Sonawane, 2009; Das, Gichuru and Singh, 2013; Kumari *et al.*, 2019).

Recent studies of Indian teacher concerns regarding their abilities to include learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in their classrooms also suggest that there are significant deficiencies in their understanding, knowledge and skills in this area (Sharma, Moore and Sonawane, 2009; Bhatnagar and Das, 2013), and this has been identified as an area in need of greater research to understand how progress can be made (Unnikrishnan, 2010). The promotion of inclusion must begin with raising awareness of the issues. In a study conducted in Maharashtra State, Yerankar (2015) found that National Education Policy (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) based upon the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, Ministry of Human Resource Development 2009) was having a positive impact.

However, there were still significant numbers of education administrators and school staff who were not conversant with the legislation's requirements, most notably in rural districts of the state. Furthermore, it was apparent that curriculum adaptations had not been made, and the professional skills of teachers had not been updated to address a changing school population. In India, teacher professional development includes pre-service and in-service training, though the latter remains non-standardised across institutions. Pre-service programs offer limited, often optional, theory-based content on disability education, leaving teachers ill-equipped for inclusive classrooms (Singal, 2015; Myreddi and Narayan, 2000). Most training focuses on single disabilities, a concern highlighted by several scholars and UNESCO (Mitchell and Desai, 2005; Sharma *et al.*, 2009; Sharma and Das, 2015; UNESCO, 2005). Sharma and Das (2015) advocate for systemic reforms and mindset shifts within the National Council for Teacher Education and UGC to prioritise inclusive teaching as essential, not optional.

A further study (Ramchand, 2021) from Karnataka State, suggested that while schools were beginning to comply with legislative requirements, issues related to the provision of quality education were still being interpreted in narrow academic terms, and there were ambiguities regarding the responsibilities of regular class teachers and special educators. The acceptance of learners with special educational needs as being the responsibility of all teachers is far from established (Shah *et al.* 2016; Forber-Pratt and Sarkar, 2022; Sharma, Malik, and Nagy 2022), and is further limited by the lack of available teaching expertise, specialist resources and necessary adaptations of building infrastructure (Sarin, 2020; Mondal and Islam, 2023). Despite the many challenges that persist and create obstacles to the promotion of inclusive schooling in India, there have been promising developments, and reported initiatives taken by teachers and others to bring about change. In a study from the north-east of India, Ningombam (2016) found that some schools had made strides towards making changes in practice to accommodate a more diverse population. However, these remained a minority of schools, echoing findings from elsewhere across the country (Femandes and Kakodka, 2016; Malkani and Rose, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

An investigation was conducted to address the research question - *"What are teachers' perceptions of their professional needs to enable them to manage an inclusive class?"*.

A purposive sample was established from ten schools across four metro-cities of India, these being Delhi -NCR, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore. Data were collected in two stages. The first being an online survey of teachers (N= 280) which enabled the collection of data from ten schools in four different locations simultaneously. This dataset was electronically stored and categorised according to both school and city location. The composite data having been organised to provide ease of access to responses to the 24 survey questions allowed for categorization and coding (Kawulich, 2017). A code was assigned to each participant and school so that open-ended responses could be traced back to each participant, whilst maintaining data anonymity. All school names were replaced by codes and participants assigned individual numbers and codes. All ethical approval, including the oversight of data management and storage were obtained from the University that was supporting the research.

Thereafter, responses to all the questions for each participant were compressed into one excel sheet by simplifying the questions, using alphabets for responses to multiple choice questions, and including the responses to open ended questions. After this final process of simplification, the data could be easily read and understood immediately, enabling the development of an initial overview and the identification of emergent themes.

One school from each location was chosen for the second stage of data collection. Focus group discussions with teachers and semi-structured interviews with other stake holders including the Heads of school, SEN Coordinators, Section Heads or Coordinators and Counsellors enabled the collection of more in-depth qualitative data in this phase.

Two focus group discussions were conducted in each school with each group comprising 6-7 participating teachers who taught different subjects and classes in the upper primary and high school section. Thereafter interviews were conducted with the other stakeholders. 8 focus groups with teachers and 16 semi-structured interviews with other stakeholders were conducted (see Table 1 and 2 below).

Table 1	
LOCATIONS	DELHI NCR MUMBAI KOLKATA BANGALORE
DATA COLLECTION METHODS	ONLINE SURVEY FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS
NO. OF SCHOOLS	FIRST STAGE- DELHI NCR- 2 MUMBAI- 3 KOLKATA- 2 BANGALORE- 3 SECOND STAGE- 1 SCHOOL FROM EACH LOCATION

Table 2	
Data Collection	
First Stage	
Online survey: n= 280	
Second Stage	
Focus group discussions with teachers: 8	
Semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders: 16	

After the qualitative data were transcribed, segmented and arranged in relation to each research question, the responses to the open-ended questions from the survey were incorporated wherever relevant and applicable. This enabled scrutiny of the comprehensive data pertaining to each research question from all three sources at one glance and assisted in the early process of triangulation.

The segmented data was scrutinised to arrive at codes and develop code definitions. Coding assisted with the organization of data by clustering it into various categories such that conclusions could be drawn later (Bell, 2005). The initial codes were obtained from the survey and applied to each research question beginning with one location, with other codes added as the data was obtained. Some codes were also added to or refined by expanding or strengthening definitions to incorporate more issues arising from the data. There were 53 initial codes which were reduced to a manageable number of 26 after merging of similar codes and elimination of the non-essential ones as suggested by Creswell (2015). These codes were then grouped together into clusters that addressed the research questions, and this enabled identification of the major themes. Data were analysed until a point of saturation when after several readings of the data, no new information could be found that would expand on any of these existing themes or sub themes (Hennink and Kaiser, 2019)

The 5 major themes derived from the data were:

- Teacher challenges in addressing the diverse needs of learners,
- Professional development needs of teachers,
- Professional development programme for teachers (PDP),
- Methods currently adopted and their effectiveness
- Inclusion in schools.

Having arrived at the themes and sub themes, the data was reorganised theme-wise to enable easy access, and final analysis was carried out. The study adopted a sequential mixed methods approach which allowed for triangulation of findings and helped refine qualitative research tools based on survey results, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the topic (Creswell, 2018). Both quantitative and qualitative data were integrated during analysis and interpretation.

This study was guided by social constructivism, which helped situate teachers’ perceptions within the context of their environment, background, and work setting. By enabling teachers to share their experiences, an understanding of

the factors shaping their views on special educational needs was constructed. This knowledge was examined through triangulation of data, with constructivism providing the lens for both the research questions and interpretation of findings.

FINDINGS

The paper provides only an overview/summary of findings as they relate to the topic of teachers' perceptions of their professional needs to manage an inclusive class. The answers to the question have thus been collated from the findings of the study across the different themes identified. To become more inclusive, teachers believe that they not only need their challenges to be understood and addressed by those who aim to support their development, but their professional development needs have to be addressed through well-designed professional development programmes. Suggestions were also provided by participants on how to make inclusion more effective in schools, and the ones pertaining to teachers' needs are considered here.

1. Knowledge, Skill Gaps, and Professional Development Needs

Data from the survey, focus groups, and interviews consistently revealed that teachers lacked adequate knowledge, skills, and capabilities to address the diverse learning needs in an inclusive classroom. A recurrent concern was the challenge in identifying the different kinds of difficulties children face and how these manifest in classroom settings.

As a group of teachers from Delhi shared during a focus group:

"To understand each learner very well, where exactly is the problem and also identify their problems, their traits."

Managing diversity in student abilities, pace of learning, and behaviour was another area where teachers felt ill-equipped:

Teacher (Delhi):

"I may not have the right skills to be able to cater to so many diverse needs. So I might want to do something with a child but may not have it in me to get out the level."

Teacher (Mumbai):

"Some understand very fast, they become restless when the teacher starts explaining again and again to those who take time to learn. So there is restlessness in the class."

In the absence of requisite training, teachers admitted to often misinterpreting children's behaviours. A teacher from Bangalore candidly explained:

"Most of the time we feel that the child is lazy, hence he is acting like that but when other people, for example those trained in this, say that it is not true, that the laziness is because of that difficulty, some problem the child has, we understand, but superficially we feel it is not related. So we need to know."

When asked about what could help address these gaps, teachers across locations expressed a strong need for **hands-on, practical training programmes**. Many described their requirement for specific strategies and inputs to manage both high-achievers and children with special needs within the same classroom.

One teacher suggested:

"If some training, some input is given to us like if you have a child with this kind of a thing, you can deal with the child in this particular manner, so something like that. Even if it's in a normal class, you have high achievers — like what can you do — some workshop, training on that."

Interestingly, although the term *differentiated instruction* was rarely used, many of the strategies teachers desired directly related to its principles. They wanted to learn how to modify content, assessments, and teaching methods to suit the individual needs of diverse learners.

Further, classroom management, lesson planning, and behavioural management training were high priorities. As one teacher remarked:

"More than academics, behavioural issues have to be addressed. We need to be trained properly in that."

Another elaborated:

“How to cater to the class, we need real training for that, how to handle all this in a given situation, given 40 minute period and 40 children, we need to be trained well, because we are not trained for that sort of a thing.”

A teacher from Kolkata echoed this:

“How to deal with the special children and common children at the same time in a class.”

Beyond classroom practices, teachers identified the need to understand and support parents of students with special needs — another area rarely addressed in their current professional development experiences.

In response to these multifaceted needs, participants proposed a comprehensive **professional development programme (PDP)**. Key recommendations for the PDP included making it practical and case-based, with actionable strategies, regular follow-ups, opportunities for interactions with experts, and platforms for exchanging ideas and best practices within and beyond their institutions.

2. Attitudes, Soft Skills, and Personal Readiness for Inclusion

Alongside gaps in knowledge and skills, the attitudes and personal readiness of teachers emerged as critical factors influencing inclusive practices. Both teachers and other stakeholders such as counsellors and heads of schools acknowledged that negative or indifferent attitudes, lack of empathy, and insufficient sensitivity among teachers posed significant challenges to effective inclusion.

Teachers themselves articulated concerns about balancing curriculum demands with the needs of diverse learners:

“It’s not possible to meet the needs of every child as we have to be firm enough to complete the curriculum.”

Another reflected on limitations in accommodating diverse learners within existing assessment frameworks:

“I feel that when you are in a class it’s not possible to do any kind of different thing, differentiation, only marking scheme you can do it so I would prefer that in question paper and all, that way if you can do, it’s possible. That’s the only way.”

Counsellors noted that some teachers often distanced themselves from responsibility for children with special needs:

“Most of the times they end up outsourcing it if there is a department in the school. What happens is, OK this is the responsibility of the department of special needs, it’s not my job.”

The importance of personal attributes such as empathy, patience, tolerance, and the ability to manage emotionally demanding situations was emphasised. A principal from Mumbai observed:

“Everyone does not have that drive, the drive or the patience to handle situations like this because now more than teaching skills, you need patience and tolerance. So everyone is not equipped to handle them.”

A teacher from Delhi added:

“There are personal challenges, I would say that sometimes children test the patience of a teacher, we get drawn into a power struggle.”

These reflections highlight the need to incorporate soft skill development and attitudinal training as an essential component of any professional development programme aimed at supporting inclusive education.

3. Stress Management and Emotional Support Needs

An unexpected yet important theme that emerged was the teachers’ need for stress management support and opportunities for emotional expression. Many teachers spoke of the mental and emotional strain associated with managing inclusive classrooms, alongside the routine demands of curriculum delivery and administrative responsibilities.

Teachers proposed the introduction of **stress management workshops**, platforms to share challenges and frustrations, and access to counselling services when needed. Additionally, they recommended that schools provide avenues for teachers to relax and unwind from work pressures, recognising the emotional labour involved in inclusive teaching.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this Indian study can be seen to have parallels with those conducted in other countries. The need for focused professional development (Holmqvist, and Lelinge 2021; Ainscow *et al.*, 2024), curriculum modification

(Fitri, 2022; Barron, 2024) and differentiated instruction (Lindner and Schwab 2020; Strogilos *et al.*, 2023), have been identified in international studies, and have helped to shape our understanding of the conditions required to promote inclusion. It is however, important to recognise that the socio-economic and cultural conditions that pertain in India may differ greatly from those reported in other studies. Hence, studies conducted within India will be important in informing future development. The insights gained from the research will ultimately help define the framework of professional development programmes in Indian States designed for teachers, and thereby influence policy and practice. Teachers who are trained will be more effective in catering to the different aspects of a child's education and also to the different types of learners, making them learners for life; the key tenets of quality education. As Florian and Camedda (2020) also contend, a renewed approach of thinking and focus is required to prepare teachers and support them to deliver effectively in diverse classrooms.

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