



Towards Belonging: India's Evolving Journey of Inclusive Education

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Being a secular state gives India the framework for inclusion, but it doesn't automatically make all Indians inclusive. Inclusion is a conscious, continuous process that needs nurturing—through education, dialogue, and social change.

Ancient Indian scriptures and texts do not explicitly mention inclusive education as we understand it today (where children with disabilities learn alongside peers who do not have a disability, in the same classroom). However, there are indirect references and philosophies in Indian traditions that emphasize compassion, dignity, and learning for all, which can be interpreted as supportive of inclusive values.

The inclusion of diversity does not automatically happen, even though the country's cultural landscape is immensely diverse. This is because secularism is a constitutional principle, not always a lived reality and diversity is deep and complex in India. Hence although Indians are used to living amidst difference, coexistence doesn't always mean full inclusion or equity. Sometimes, diversity exists alongside discrimination or segregation. Social Norms and Prejudices still influence inclusion and above all inclusion requires intentional effort. Inclusion is more than just tolerance; it means actively valuing and integrating diverse identities into decision-making, education, workspaces, media representation, and more. This requires awareness, empathy, and deliberate action—through education, policy, and civic engagement.

Definitely, India is moving towards inclusive education for children with disabilities because of a strong mix of constitutional mandates, international commitments, social justice values, and practical educational goals. India is embracing inclusive education to fulfil its constitutional promises, global obligations, and commitment to social equity. Inclusion is a conscious, continuous process that needs nurturing—through education, dialogue, and social change. It's not just about placing children with disabilities in classrooms—it's about creating schools where every child can learn, belong, and thrive.

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The NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusive and equitable education for all students, including those with disabilities. In December 2024, the government abolished the, 'No Detention Policy', for Classes 5 and 8, aiming to enhance student performance evaluations.

Samagra Shiksha Scheme, which was initiated on April 1, 2021, and is to continuing till March 31, 2026. The major objective this scheme is to aligns with NEP 2020 and to provide quality education in an inclusive environment. The Samagra Shiksha Scheme aims to address the diverse backgrounds and needs of all children, fostering active participation and enhancing academic abilities across various student groups.

Accessibility Code for Educational Institutions: Notified on January 10, 2024, and incorporated into the Rules of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016 on June 20, 2024, this code examines physical and informational barriers in schools. It provides child-friendly standards with cost-effective solutions for existing buildings and guidelines to ensure new buildings comply with national accessibility standards.

The Delhi Directorate of Education directed 12 special schools to fully comply with inclusive education provisions under the RPwD Act 2016 and NEP 2020. This initiative aims to integrate inclusive practices within the specified timeline. Before we move towards the key aspects of inclusive education, it is important to understand why inclusive education is almost an essentiality now and probably it always was. Inclusive education is about acceptance, diversity, and belonging. It helps to reduce discrimination, improve academic and social outcomes and most important of all build a more empathetic and just society.

As we move towards creating an inclusive education system, specially creating schools as vibrant, comfortable learning zones for all children where the emphasis is on holistic development of each and every child regardless of their backgrounds or their abilities.

With a conscious understanding now emerging that special education teachers of the Special Education Departments of the school system and the general education teachers who were always catering to the majority of the children in the education system, need to work together as a team and be support system for each other in order to reach out to each and every child in the education system and be able to elicit the best abilities and best learning for each and every child. These best learning which will vary for each and every child with or without special needs/disability is to be done in the same classroom and not by creating separate spaces for the learning different categories of children. The categorisation or classification of children has to be minimised



The spaces where each and every child learns is not to be an isolated space such as the resource centre or the learning centre only but the larger spaces of the school system where all other children are learning. This would include the regular classroom where majority of the children are or the sports field where the entire class goes or any other activity places of the school systems. Indian schools are implementing various initiatives to foster inclusive education, ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have access to quality learning experiences. The IEPs and the Lesson Plans are now being merged and the Learning Plan has emerged as the common Lesson plan/IEP of the mainstream inclusive classrooms where every child is learning at their own pace and to the potential best possible for them. However, the various learning styles of every child are as a normal process used by the teachers to enable each and every child to learn best by the way they learn best. Indian classroom general teachers with the networking of the special education teachers are fast becoming experts in utilising Universal designs of Learning (UDL) as well as Differentiated Instructions in their mainstream classrooms. The special educators are developing amazing resource rooms content which conceptualising all the possible teaching learning material that may be used in the general inclusive classroom. So, the special educators are moving forward to not only one-to-one instructional processes though IEP and TLM for only one child but Learning Plans and TLM kits that reaches out to the entire inclusive classroom with the collaborative team work of the special educator and the general teachers of the school system. Benefits of Riitesh Meditation

Usage of technology, peer-tutoring, buddy systems, flexible teaching-learning process, flexible assessments, and multi-sensory teaching strategies are the norms towards which Indian classrooms are moving towards. Even the sitting arrangements in the classrooms now moving towards becoming more and more learner centered rather than the traditional method of teacher being at the beginning of the classroom and all the children sitting in straight parallel rows in the traditional teacher centred classrooms. These sitting arrangements are gradually moving to being the norms not only for the junior classes but also the middle and senior school class rooms, but enabling equal opportunities and individual support.

Thus Inclusive education is now seen not as placing children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, but as a holistic approach where every child—regardless of ability—learns, belongs, and thrives. Special educators and general educators are collaborating more closely, using Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Differentiated Instruction, and shared Learning Plans instead of isolated Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Inclusive practices now extend to classroom layouts, teaching materials, flexible assessments, and use of technology and peer support. The aim is to reduce segregation, support varied learning styles, and foster empathetic, child-centered environments across all levels of schooling.