

REDESIGNING IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING PRACTICES FOR INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS IN INDIA

¹Jyoti Kumari, ²Chandraprabha Pandey

¹Pursuing Ph.D in Education, Central University of South Bihar

²Assistant Professor, Central University of South Bihar

Abstract

The NEP 2020 underscores the importance of inclusivity as a cornerstone for transforming education in India. To achieve this vision, in-service teacher training becomes a critical lever for change, equipping educators with the necessary skills, knowledge, and strategies to create inclusive classrooms. This paper examines the role of in-service teacher training in implementing the NEP 2020 guidelines for inclusive education. It highlights the need for pedagogical shifts and current gaps in India's teacher training landscape. Drawing on successful case studies from Indian and international practices, this review explores effective models of professional development, such as collaborative workshops, mentorship programs, and blended learning approaches, to empower teachers. It provides recommendations for designing context-specific training modules, strengthening policy frameworks, and establishing robust monitoring systems. By aligning in-service teacher training with NEP 2020 guidelines, India can make significant progress in creating inclusive classrooms that cater to the diverse needs of all students.

Keywords- *In -Service Teacher Training, Inclusive Education, Challenges, NEP 2020*

Introduction

Every learner matters and matters equally, this is what inclusion is about. Inclusion calls for transformation – for a paradigm shift in the philosophy and practice of education – away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach (UNESCO, 2024). Inclusive education has emerged as a cornerstone for achieving equity and quality in education worldwide. It is a philosophy and practice that seeks to accommodate all learners, regardless of their socio-economic background, physical or cognitive abilities, or linguistic and cultural differences (UNESCO, 2020; NEP, 2020). Globally, inclusive education is recognized as essential to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education for all. In India, the NEP (2020) presents a transformative vision for education, with inclusivity as one of its central pillars. It reaffirms the commitment of bridging up the social category gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes at all levels of school education.

In 1994, The Salamanca statement on principles, policy and practice in special needs education said “The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school.”

By redesigning education systems to center on diversity as an asset, we can teach future generations to learn, live, and value everyone. Instilling an appreciation for diversity from an early age is key to creating societies where differences are seen as enriching rather than intimidating (Chadha, 2000).

Inclusive education demands that teachers maintain a positive attitude, acknowledge its benefits for all children, and adapt to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Teachers play crucial role in delivering quality education for all, which requires specialized knowledge and skills to effectively address the diverse needs of their pupils in classroom (UNESCO, 2005).

Inclusive education in India remains in its nascent stage due to inadequate teacher training, lack of awareness, limited resources, and historical underinvestment (Bindal & Sharma, 2010; Sharma & Desai, 2002; Swaroop, 2001). Even trained teachers face challenges in implementing inclusive practices (Sharma & Desai, 2002), though some successfully translate training into effective instruction for students with disabilities (David & Kuyini, 2012). The literature on inclusive education largely consists of personal commentaries rather than empirical research, with limited studies available (Enabling Centre, 1999; NCERT, 1997).

This paper reviews the existing literature on inclusive education in India, highlighting key trends, challenges, and opportunities. It examines how in-service teacher training can bridge the gap between policy and practice, facilitating the effective implementation of NEP 2020. However, the scarcity and inaccessibility of research in this domain pose significant challenges (Singal, 2006).

Global Trends in Inclusive Education

Understanding global trends in inclusive education is crucial for identifying effective practices and learning from the successes and challenges faced by other countries. Study by Rose et al., (2021) highlights how UDL frameworks help create flexible learning environments that can accommodate the diverse needs of students. Moreover, countries like Finland and Canada have shown success in implementing inclusive practices through robust teacher training programs, community engagement, and the integration of technology to support learners with special needs (OECD, 2023). The Salamanca 30 years achievement report says High-quality data is crucial for tracking progress in inclusive education. While 68% of countries define inclusive education in their policies, only 57% adopt a truly comprehensive approach. Education opportunities remain influenced by identity, background, and abilities. Emerging global challenges, including COVID-19 disruptions, conflicts, and financial inequalities, further hinder progress.

Case Studies and Best Practices in Inclusive Education

These case studies illustrate diverse approaches to inclusive education, offering practical strategies adaptable to both international and Indian contexts. Kerala's Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan integrates children with disabilities into mainstream schools, focusing on teacher training, assistive technologies, and community involvement (Dash & Mohanty, 2021). Finland emphasizes teacher collaboration through co-teaching and UDL, while Canada prioritizes differentiated instruction with individualized education plans (IEPs) and peer tutoring (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). Australia uses blended learning models to enhance accessibility, particularly in rural areas, supported by

community involvement (Singh et al., 2019). Rajasthan's Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage focuses on capacity building and infrastructure, whereas Singapore emphasizes experiential teacher training (Sharma, 2020). Bhutan adopts a community-based approach, partnering with NGOs for localized teacher training and parental collaboration (Sharma & Loreman, 2018). Saikia & Sarmah (2019) in Assam's schools highlights the necessity of teacher orientation on inclusive practices. It found short-term training ineffective, emphasizing the need for long-term, continuous training programs for inclusive education (David & Kuyini, 2012).

These case studies offer valuable insights for policymakers and educators, emphasizing the need for comprehensive teacher training, policy support, community engagement, and effective monitoring to enhance inclusivity.

Interventions of NEP 2020 on Inclusion and Teacher Training

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights an equitable and inclusive education system, ensuring that students with diverse learning needs receive equal opportunities to thrive. Schools are required to develop a Perspective Academic Plan (PAP) annually, aligning with the learning needs of all students and implementing remedial measures for those who are not performing well (NIEPA, 2020).

To achieve this vision, NEP 2020 emphasizes strengthening in-service teacher training programs to equip educators with the skills to address classroom diversity (NCTE, 2024). Training will integrate awareness and strategies for teaching students with disabilities, gender sensitization, and support for underrepresented groups (NGIFEIE, 2024). The policy further advocates leveraging digital tools and assistive technologies for accessible and personalized learning while promoting flexible and multidisciplinary curriculum adaptations to accommodate diverse learning styles (NCERT, 2020; NCTE, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

Role of In-Service Teacher Training in Inclusive Education

In-service teacher training plays a critical role in translating the vision of inclusive education into practice. The Salamanca Statement (1994) emphasized the necessity of equipping teachers with skills to handle diverse classrooms through continuous professional development, interaction with trainers, and distance education. However, teacher training programs in India often rely on traditional lecture-based methodologies that lack interactive components and practical exposure (Bansal, 2016), leaving educators unprepared to manage diverse learning needs, adapt lesson plans for students with disabilities, and utilize assistive technologies effectively (Das & Roy, 2023).

The effectiveness of inclusive education largely depends on teachers' competencies in differentiated instruction, peer learning, and reflective teaching practices (Sharma & Loreman, 2018; Raut, 2024). Studies indicate that nearly 70% of regular school teachers in Delhi lacked training in special education and had no experience teaching students with disabilities, while 87% did not have access to support services in their classrooms (Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013). Furthermore, pre-service teacher education lacks the capacity to address the needs of disabled and disadvantaged children (NCTE, 2021), making in-service training essential for equipping teachers with the necessary skills.

Despite policy commitments, a significant gap remains between policy and practice in inclusive education (NCTE, 2009). While, NEP (2020) highlights the degrading quality of teacher education, it recommends continuous professional development, career management, and progression for teachers (Sarkar & Yadav, 2023). Studies have emphasized that short-term training programs are ineffective, necessitating long-term and on-going training initiatives (Brussino, 2021). The integration of mentorship programs and blended learning approaches can enhance the accessibility and sustainability of such training initiatives (Kumari et al., 2019). International studies have demonstrated the importance of in-service training in shaping teacher attitudes and competencies. While some research indicates no significant difference in the attitudes of experienced and inexperienced teachers toward inclusive education (Tabakhmelashvili, 2008), others highlight significant differences between general and special education teachers, attributed to the latter's deeper understanding of inclusion (Olson, 2003; Yucker, 1988). Both studies emphasize the need for stronger collaboration between special and regular educators to enhance inclusive practices.

Challenges in In-Service Teacher Training for Inclusivity

The NEP 2020 articulates a bold vision for transforming education through inclusivity, focusing on empowering educators as central agents of this change. Despite its progressive vision, several significant challenges hinder its implementation.

1. **Limited Focus on Inclusion:**
Existing training programs often overlook inclusive education principles, focusing instead on general pedagogy. Regular teacher training programmes do not include the inclusivity as a core element of the training. (Sarkar & Yadav, 2023; Singal, 2006)
2. **Resource Constraints:**
Training programme and institutes lack access to assistive technologies and various training materials, particularly in rural areas (Dash & Mohanty, 2021)
3. **Lack of Exposure to Diverse Classroom Scenarios:**
Teacher trainees rarely get opportunities to engage with diverse student populations during their training, limiting their practical understanding of inclusive education.
4. **Lacks Collaborative Inclusive Practices :**
Collaboration is a key component of inclusive education. Teacher training programs lacks collaboration among educators, special education professionals, and support staff to provide comprehensive support to students with diverse needs. (Raut, 2024)
5. **Lacks Professional Development**
Teachers face inadequate professional development, limiting their ability to implement advancements like Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction, and assistive technologies (Raut, 2024; Sharma, 2022). Without continuous training, they struggle to support diverse learners effectively and uphold inclusive education standards.
6. **Insufficient Focus on Cultural Sensitivity:**
Cultural sensitivity and awareness are often overlooked in training programs, which can lead to biases and exclusionary practices in classrooms (Verma, 2022).
7. **Inadequate Follow-Up**

Few mechanisms exist to assess the impact of training programs, they are often insufficient. This results in minimal integration of newly acquired knowledge and skills into classroom practices (NCFTE, 2009).

Recommendations for In-Service Teacher Training for Inclusive Education

1. Implementation of Innovative training models

Models can be implemented to equip teachers with the skills and strategies needed to support diverse learners and create inclusive educational environments. These models include collaborative workshops that engage teachers in peer discussions and real-world case studies (Sharma & Loreman, 2018), blended learning approaches that combine online modules with hands-on practice for greater accessibility and flexibility (NCERT, 2020), and mentorship programs that pair teachers with experienced mentors for continuous guidance (NCFSE, 2023). Additionally, reflective practices encourage teachers to evaluate their methods and adapt strategies based on classroom feedback (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

2. Curriculum Overhaul

Teacher training programs must be restructured to equip educators with strategies for adapting curricula, materials, and assessments to accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities (Raut, 2024). Courses on inclusive pedagogy should emphasize understanding student diversity and adopting teaching practices that cater to all learners. Inclusive teaching materials, textbooks in accessible languages, and classroom-based assessment tools are crucial to supporting marginalized students and those at risk of low achievement (UNESCO, 2016). Additionally, training should incorporate modules on mental health and emotional intelligence to help teachers create supportive learning environments. The integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles will further enable educators to develop flexible instructional strategies and inclusive learning experiences (Patel, 2021; Raut, 2024).

3. Continuous Professional Development

Teacher development is a continuous journey that does not end after the transition from teacher education to the classroom and extends throughout their career. Recognizing teachers as lifelong learners, it is essential for education systems to identify their evolving needs and provide on-going professional development opportunities. (Brussino, 2021). Regular workshops and Seminars should be conducted to ensure that teachers are equipped to new tools, technologies, and methods to promote inclusive and diverse classroom environments effectively inclusive education (Verma, 2022; Majoko, 2019)

4. Peer Support and Mentoring

Teachers need support from teaching assistants, head teachers, and education coordinators to foster inclusive classrooms. These roles must be well-trained to aid inclusive teaching. In-service training should integrate with practical learning, emphasizing child-centered approaches. Key strategies include peer training, professional exchanges, learning communities, resource centres, collaboration between mainstream and special schools, mentoring, and team teaching. (Bansal, 2016; Majoko, 2019).

5. Resource Allocation

Adequate resources must be allocated for infrastructure development, expert trainer and the procurement of assistive technologies in teacher training institutes (Majoko, 2019). So that, educators are well-equipped with the necessary skills and tools to support diverse learning need.

6. Monitoring and Evaluation

Developing a robust system for monitoring and evaluating in-service teacher training programs is essential for continuous improvement and effectiveness. Feedback from trainees, mentors, and other stakeholders provides valuable insights into areas needing enhancement (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Conclusion

In-service teacher training is critical to achieving NEP 2020's vision of inclusive classrooms. Policymakers must prioritize strengthening training programs, allocating resources, and fostering collaborations to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Current education systems often undervalue diversity, viewing it as a challenge rather than an enriching aspect of learning. Structural issues, including rigid curricula, narrowly defined testing, and insufficient teacher preparation, contribute to exclusion in schools.

To create truly inclusive classrooms, education systems must embrace diversity by addressing gaps such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and insufficient support systems. Mainstream schools should adopt inclusive policies, adapting teaching methods and assessments to meet diverse needs.

The study highlights the importance of in service training focusing on awareness, behavioural management, curriculum differentiation, and inclusive teaching strategies. Collaboration between special and general educators, along with administrative support and professional development, is essential to fostering positive attitudes and effective practices for inclusion. Implementing these as core element of regular in service training can ensure accessible, quality education for all children, making inclusive education a practical and transformative reality.

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