

Perspectives of State Functionaries on Inclusive Education with Focus on Children with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify state key functionaries' perspectives and actions taken to implement the recommendations of the National Education Policy 2020 with reference to inclusive education of children with disabilities. A mixed-method research design was employed to understand the awareness of the state functionaries on the educational issues and concerns, activities and practices taken to facilitate inclusive education for children with disabilities. Ten open and closed-ended items of the questionnaire were designed for this study. It was administered to the participants of both states, Kerala (n= 23) and Uttarakhand (n= 19). In addition, a focus group discussion was conducted on the challenges perceived by the selected participants. The result showed that although participants were aware of the educational issues and concerns of children with disabilities, and initiatives had been followed to facilitate inclusive education in their states, gaps were present towards the implementation of inclusive practices. Findings indicate some of the challenges, such as the perception of parents, structural arrangements, and teacher incompetency. The findings highlighted the necessity of extensive training of the state key functionaries for the effective implementation of equitable and inclusive education with a focus on children with disabilities.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Children with Disabilities, Continuous Professional Development Programme, National Education Policy 2020*

Introduction

Inclusion and its strategies originated from several key international declarations, which also impacted the education scene in India.

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Over the last three decades various international policies, like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), and the Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action (UNESCO, 1994), have encouraged inclusive educational development for all learners, including Children with Disabilities (CwDs). A major push for inclusive education was strengthened by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which highlights the rights of persons with disabilities to be involved and participate fully in society, including education (UN, 2006). Furthermore, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to guarantee equitable and inclusive quality education for all, stressing the significance of educational access as a vital human right (UN, 2015).

India has taken numerous initiatives to encourage a holistic vision of education that values diversity, nurtures learning environments free from discrimination, and allows all children, with focus on CwDs, to realise their potential. Most remarkably among them are the Integrated Education of Disabled Children Scheme (IEDC) 1974, the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan 2001, the Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities 2005, and the National Policy of Disabilities 2006. India ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the year 2007, and free and compulsory education to children with disabilities is ensured by Article 24 of the Indian Constitution. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009, ensures that “children from 6 to 14 years get the free and compulsory education” with specific provision for the weaker section and disadvantaged groups, including CwDs (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009). Further, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 provides specific measures to facilitate inclusive education for CwDs, recognising 21 types of disabilities. These measures have placed inclusive education at the core of India's education transformation measures.

In keeping with this, the National Education Policy (NEP) was released in 2020, marking a significant milestone in India's educational landscape. This comes after 34 years since the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, which placed a strong emphasis on inclusion of children with disabilities into regular schools. In the NEP 2020, disabilities (as scheduled and categorised in the

RPwD Act, 2016) are identified under the broader umbrella term referred to as Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). The policy endorses the provisions and measures suggested by the RPwD Act 2016, on inclusive education. To facilitate effective implementation of the recommendations of the NEP 2020, the Samagra Shiksha Scheme—being the core scheme for the school education sector—had been revised and redesigned. The major guiding principles of Samagra Shiksha (SS) 2022 are aligned with SDG 4 for education, and assist the States and UTs to provide appropriate support and services to ensure full participation of CwDs as per their needs and abilities (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The Census of India (2011) data shows the disability prevalence rose from 2.13 per cent in 2001 to 2.21 per cent in 2011, indicating an 8.5 per cent increase over the decade. The rural disability prevalence increased from 2.21 per cent in 2001 to 2.24 per cent in 2011, a 1.4 per cent rise; however, urban areas saw a more significant increase from 1.93 per cent in 2001 to 2.17 per cent in 2011, marking a 12.4 per cent rise. Disparity in prevalence has been noted, while India's 2011 Census reports only 2.68 crore (2.21 per cent of the population) as having disability, global data (WHO, 2011) estimates 60 crore population (15 per cent of the global population) in prevalence of disability. Global estimates suggest the actual number may be seven times higher. This large gap suggests significant under-reporting and that many persons with disabilities remain invisible in India's official statistics. Further, the NEP 2020 gives equal emphasis to inclusive education at all levels of schooling, from the foundational stage to higher education, including home-based education, and focuses on diversity, rights, access, equity and inclusion, high quality of education, and provides recommendations for its effective implementation.

The NEP 2020 had intensively discussed the inclusion of CwDs throughout the different sections (e.g., school education, teacher education, and higher education). The policy has introduced significant recommendations in the approaches to teacher education and highlighted the pre-service programmes and courses at all levels to equip the teachers for teaching in inclusive classrooms. To realise this, the NEP outlines a diverse set of solutions in school education, including educational resources available in all schools, suitable use of assistive technologies, early screening, identification, and intervention necessary support structure to CwDs wherever needed, focus on Indian

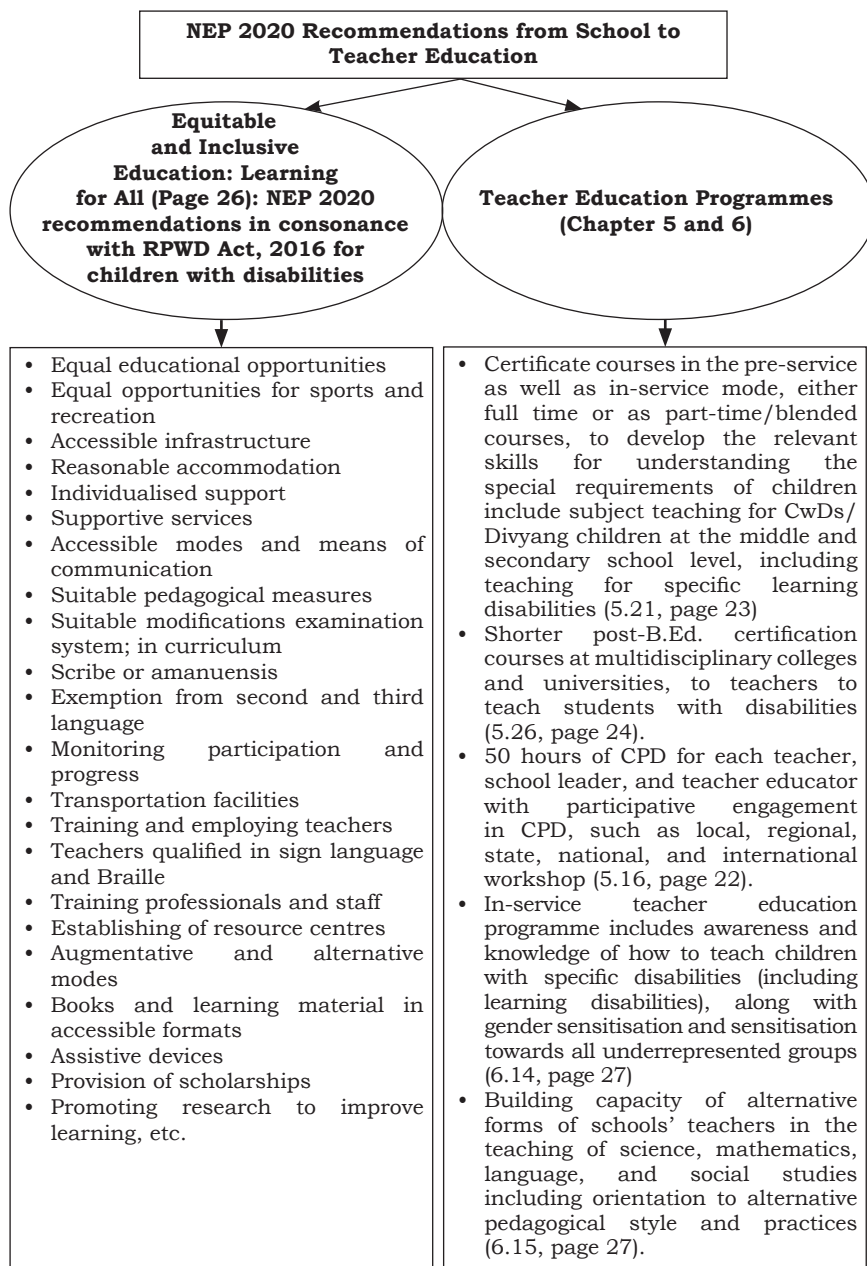


Figure 1: Inclusive education

Source: NEP (2020)

Sign Language (ISL), and capacity building of pre-service and in-service teachers. (Ministry of Education, 2020). The major outlines of the recommendations in school education and teacher-related components are presented in Figure 1.

Review of Related Literature

Several recommendations have been given by the NEP 2020 for bridging educational and social gaps for all, including CwDs through suggestive measures and interventions, including teacher the education programmes (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, its success relies on the actual implementation of the recommendations at ground level (Sharma et al., 2019; Singal, 2019). There are still considerable challenges when it comes to the implementation of the educational policy for inclusion. The role of family and community is crucial in the education of CwDs (Gowramma et. al., 2018). Researchers have found many apprehensions of the parents of CwDs regarding the negative experience of discrimination (Divan et al., 2012). Further, school related factors such as class size, number of children with disabilities in the class, the severity level of disability and support at the system and school level, constraint in resources, administrative level challenges, and non-acceptance may also have an effect on education of CwDs in inclusive environment (Mondal and Mondal 2025; Das, 2013; Kumar et al., 2025). Quality ECCE is not accessible to numerous children, especially those from SEDGs (Ministry of Education, 2020), including CwDs, with a lack of infrastructure including ramps, disabled-friendly toilets, wheelchairs, or necessary equipment (Rao et al., 2021; Malik and Hasan, 2024). Researchers have paid attention to the role of teachers and pre-service teacher education programmes (Demirel and Islamoglu, 2025) in equipping the teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms, including pre-service teacher education courses that focus mainly on theory and a gap remains in their practical aspects (Singal, 2019). A recent meta-analysis of teachers' beliefs about inclusive education (Sengun, 2022) emphasised that little is known about how state key functionaries perceive the educational issues and the current practices employed towards equitable and inclusive education of CwDs. Sharma et al. (2008) raised the need to identify barriers and challenges for the implementation of inclusive education effectively. There is a huge and sufficient number of research investigating the role of teachers

(Taneja-Johansson, 2023; Chu et al., 2020) and their beliefs, challenges, and capacities on including CwDs in regular settings. However, a lot of research is needed on the perceptions of certain educational groups, notably district and state key functionaries (Tracy-Bronson, 2020), responsible for preparing strategies and implementing successful inclusive education. Although they do not deliver instruction directly, their leadership practices contribute to implementing inclusive education in their states. It is necessary to investigate how state key functionaries view the difficulties and practices of inclusive education for CwDs. From the perspective of functionaries of states of Kerala and Uttarakhand, this article seeks to examine the obstacles hindering the schooling of CwDs in an inclusive setup and the initiatives taken to make inclusive education successful.

Research Questions

Question 1: To examine the educational concerns and issues experienced by the state key functionaries responsible for the implementation of inclusive education.

Question 2: To identify the practices adopted on inclusive schooling for CwDs.

Method

Research Design

A mixed method approach was employed to understand the educational issues and concerns, activities, and practices taken to facilitate inclusion. To gather comprehensive data both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used.

Settings

In states, the SCERTs, DIETs, and Samagra Shiksha functionaries are responsible for realising the provisions of inclusive education, guided by the national-level policies and schemes. This involves developing an action plan and strategies for the education of CwDs to be delivered in an inclusive setup. Purposive sampling was employed to identify stakeholders working in the area of inclusive education. The participants were inclusive education coordinators, Samagra Shiksha officers, block and cluster education officers, special education teachers, school principals, SCERTs and DIETs, coordinators and faculties. Kerala represents the southern region

of India, while Uttarakhand represents the northern Himalayan region. This juxtaposition enabled the researcher to examine the perspectives of key functionaries of states with two divergent contexts: one with a relatively strong educational infrastructure and equity indicators (Kerala), and another with greater access and geographical challenges (Uttarakhand).

Participants

The researcher purposefully identified districts in the Kerala and Uttarakhand where the Samagra Shiksha office was located. After obtaining the approval from the State Project Directors (SPDs) of both the selected states, Kerala and Uttarakhand, data were collected in person by the researcher through on-site visit conducted separately in their states. Data were collected from 42 participants — 23 from Kerala state and 19 from Uttarakhand state. Table 1 reflects the demographic details of participants from both states.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Demographics	Category	Kerala (n = 23)	Uttarakhand (n = 19)
Gender	Male	52.2% (12)	36.8% (7)
	Female	47.8% (11)	63.2% (12)
Age	Under 40	21.7% (5)	21.1% (4)
	40–50	47.8% (11)	26.3% (5)
	Above 50 years	30.5% (7)	52.6% (10)
Designation	Programme/ Project Officer	39.1% (9)	42.11% (8)
	School Principal	4.3% (1)	10.53% (2)
	Lecturer (SCERT)	30.4% (7)	21.05% (4)
	Special Education Teacher	26.9% (6)	26.32% (5)

Data Collection Tools

A self-developed questionnaire in both Hindi and English was used as the primary tool for data collection followed with a focus group discussion to gather participants’ perceptions on inclusive education for CwDs. The researcher used the National Guidelines and Implementation Framework on Equitable and Inclusive Education (NGIFEIE) as a guide while developing the survey tool with focus on CwDs (National Council of Educational Research and

Training, 2024). The guidelines were developed by the Department of Education of Groups with Special Needs (DEGSN), National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), India. They were formulated based on the recommendations of the NEP 2020 to realise equitable and inclusive education from the foundational stage to the secondary stage of school education including teacher education programmes. The questionnaire was reviewed by the inclusive education experts. All the suggestions made by the reviewers were incorporated, this improved the content validity of the instrument. The questionnaire covered two sections. Section A comprised of demographic information including age, gender, and designation. Section B comprised of questions related to the research objectives on inclusive education for CwDs including both close-ended (yes or no) and open-ended (short answers) questions on awareness of the educational issues and concerns of children from SEDGs; with focus on CwDs and steps taken in implementing education of CwDs in regular school settings. Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted with the participants related to the challenges and concerns on the implementation of the recommendations of the NEP 2020. The focus group discussions lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. For ethical consideration, all the participants were thoroughly informed and gave formal consent to contribute in the study.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used for analysing the quantitative data by calculating frequency and percentages to arrive at inferences. Furthermore, data collected through the questionnaire and focus group discussions were coded, tabulated, and analysed thematically. Clark and Braun (2016) agreed on the selection of thematic analysis due to its flexibility as well the appropriateness in achieving the objectives of the study on providing an insight on how a particular phenomenon is experienced, thought, and felt by the participants.

Findings

This section outlines the study's findings, beginning with the presentation of quantitative data obtained from the close-ended questions followed with the qualitative results from the open-ended questions and focus group discussion.

Results of Quantitative Data**Table 2: Alternate Responses of the Participants**

		Percentage of participants responded 'Yes'		Percentage of participants responded 'No'	
S. No.	Statements	Kerala (n = 23)	Uttarakhand (n = 19)	Kerala (n = 23)	Uttarakhand (n = 19)
1.	Aware of the educational issues and concerns of children with disabilities	91.30% (21)	100% (19)	8.70% (2)	0.00% (0)
2.	Aware of the recommendations and provisions given in the NEP (2020) on inclusive education for children with disabilities	82.60% (19)	94.73% (18)	17.40% (4)	5.27% (1)
3.	Facing any difficulties in implementing the recommendations of the NEP 2020 for children with disabilities	78.26% (18)	78.94% (15)	21.74% (5)	21.06% (4)
4.	State has an equitable and inclusive education (EIE) cell	39.13% (9)	84.21% (16)	60.87% (14)	15.79% (3)
5.	Mechanism or steps for early screening and identification of CwDs at all levels	91.30% (21)	94.73% (18)	8.70% (2)	5.27% (5)
6.	Mechanism to expand and strengthen the early-childhood education programme for all including children with disabilities	91.30% (21)	94.73% (18)	8.70% (2)	5.27% (5)
7.	Collaboration with NGOs and organisations for overall development of children belonging to SEDGs with focus on children with disabilities	56.52% (13)	78.94% (15)	43.48% (10)	21.06% (4)
8.	In-service training teachers to teach in inclusive schools at all levels	82.60% (19)	89.47% (17)	17.400% (4)	10.53% (2)

9.	Action studies conducted by the state on education of students belonging to SEDGs including children with disabilities	86.95% (20)	42.10% (8)	13.050% (3)	57.90% (11)
10.	Awareness of the National Guidelines and Implementation Framework on Equitable and Inclusive Education (NGIFEIE) to the inclusion of children with disabilities	78.26% (18)	84.21% (16)	21.740% (5)	15.79% (3)

From Table 2, it can be analysed that both the states responded with a high level of awareness regarding the educational issues of CwDs. The provisions and guidelines to implement NEP 2020 recommendations for inclusive education suggested that the participants identified the issues and concerns related to inclusive education and are aware of the NEP 2020 recommendations on inclusive education. A noteworthy insight which developed from the above responses is that although both the state participants were aware of the educational needs of CwDs, they also experienced difficulties in implementing inclusive education for CwDs. The gaps in awareness and difficulties encountered for schooling CwDs in inclusive settings, reflect the gaps in policies and its practices. Further, mixed responses were reported related to the provisions on inclusive education. For instance, establishment of equitable and inclusive education cell, steps for early identification and screening, early childhood education programme with a focus on CwDs, and collaboration with NGOs and in-service training of teachers to teach in inclusive schools had a higher response from the Uttarakhand participants than the Kerala participants. The results indicate variations in the readiness of the states on inclusive education for CwDs.

The results depicted in Table 2, further raised concerns that there is less focus on action research on education of CwDs by Uttarakhand as compared to Kerala state participants. It can be concluded that the quantitative analysis of the data shows that both the state functionaries perceive that their schools practiced inclusive education for CwDs and they responded positively. Guliya et al. (2023), raised concerns on numerous challenges in inclusive

education in India such as dearth of skilled teachers, practical based curriculum, limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, lack of awareness, negative attitude, ineffective strategies, and lack of supportive policies.

Further, an attempt was made to substantiate the results obtained from the quantitative findings with the qualitative results to get a deeper understanding of inclusive education for CwDs in states of Kerala and Uttarakhand. After reviewing the qualitative data responses, what emerged was presented under two sections pertaining to the research questions of the study.

Results of Qualitative Data

Educational Concerns and Issues Experienced by the State Key Functionaries

Through analysis of the data, three themes emerged: perception of parents, structural arrangements, and gaps in training.

- Perception of Parents: The parent and society factor, related to lack of awareness and attitudinal issues towards CwDs were described as a significant concern for education of CwDs by both the state participants.

Kerala state participants expressed that “socially backward and deprived children are victims of their social conditions like neglect, lack of encouragement from some sections of society, and social expectations.”

Traditional mindset and stereotypes were reflected in the Uttarakhand state participants. They stated “parents do not want to educate their disabled children. Most people believe that they cannot contribute towards society and the nation.” Majority of the participants mentioned that “villagers do not understand the programmes and schemes of the government and the education of these children is neglected by their parents.”

The responses from both the state participants showed unawareness of government programmes and schemes. They experience, “difficulty in getting proper certificates from parents; parents do not give the information properly, do not give the documents, like PAN numbers or birth certificates required for admission and facilities provided by the government to these children and the correct report of the students age is not received.”

Further, it was observed that the socio-economic conditions of the parents of CwDs and their home environment have a significant impact on successful inclusion. A Kerala participant said that “parents neglect the education of their children to improve the financial condition of their home and make these children work.”

Similarly, majority of the participants of both the states, especially an Uttarakhand participant mentioned “education is not their priority, bread earning of their family is important. If both the parents of these socially and economically weak children work, then there is lack of admission and absenteeism in the school.” They also stated that “there are instances where children cannot come to school because they have to take care of younger siblings.”

The recurrent issues which were highlighted by the participants irrespective of the state were socio-economic deprivation leading to parents’ neglect and low attendance.

- **Structural Arrangements:** Another key theme which emerged from both the state participants responses was inadequate structural arrangements related to infrastructure, dearth of teachers, lack of disabled-friendly toilets, excessive workload, overcrowded classes, lag of barrier-free infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, and special education teachers.

One of the key issues noted in the responses mentioned by the Uttarakhand participants was inaccessible toilets for CwDs. They stated, “such children are often absent from school, which makes it difficult to educate them. There is a lack of toilets for CwDs” Further, majority of both the state participants mentioned that “classroom sizes are not appropriate for activities and most schools are not disabled-friendly.”

Further, they highlighted the issues related to overcrowded classes and teachers overburdened with work, which were reflected in their responses. For instance, “due to excess work and high number of students, there is a problem in providing individual support.”

- **Gaps in Training:** Furthermore, both states recorded a dearth of special education teachers and insufficient funding for support staff. There is a lack of therapeutic services, inadequate teacher-student ratio, lack of proper screening, identification, and insufficient training of Anganwadi

workers. Inclusive education teachers further mentioned educational concerns and issues especially for CwDs. For instance, majority of the Kerala participants expressed that, “despite inclusive education being a significant component of teacher capacity building, there is no special kind of training specifically for pre-service teachers in Kerala related to inclusive education. The B.Ed. and D.El.Ed. students gain general classroom experience but do not receive dedicated special training as part of their studies.”

In comparison to this, Uttarakhand participants raised issues on minimal training opportunities and the absence of model inclusive schools at the DIET level. Teachers undergo 50-hour general training, but inclusive education is confined to a single session. The lack of trained master trainers and practical exposure further limits the transfer of inclusive pedagogy into classrooms. The participants described “while training is provided, a common challenge is that only one session is often allotted for inclusive education, which is deemed inadequate for general school teachers who need to be well trained.”

Further, lack of knowledge of the teachers on curriculum adaptation and use of local language teaching-learning material were described as major educational challenges. This reflects the need of training to the teachers to connect the curriculum with the local context and address the diverse needs of students.

Table 3: Categories of Educational Issues and Concerns for CwDs

Themes	Sub-themes
Perception of Parents	• Lack of home learning atmosphere • Missing regular classes • Neglect by family • Lack of parental awareness on government schemes and benefits • Bread earning priority • Drop outs • Stigmatisation • Lack of documents (PAN, etc.)
Structural Arrangements	• Inadequate special education teachers • Schools not disabled-friendly • Transportation • Supportive staff including therapist
Gaps in Training	• Class size • Lack of proper screening and identification • Insufficient funding • Lack of periodical implementation monitoring

	• Lack of disability-specific training • Focus on theory rather than practical • Lack of knowledge on curriculum adaptation • Less focus on using local language and teaching learning material • Disconnect of curriculum with local context
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Practices Adopted for Inclusive Schooling

From the qualitative data analysis, five major themes which emerged on practices adopted by the selected states in inclusive schooling for CwDs are presented below:

- **Mechanism and Resource Support:** Participants of both the states mentioned the mechanism and resource support provided to CwDs related to establishment of block resource centres, provision of scholarships and allowances to CwDs. The participants of Kerala mentioned, “the state government, under Samagra Shiksha Kerala (SSK), established therapy centres, autism centres, and multi-sensory centres in designated areas in all Block Resource Centres (BRCs). In these centres, various therapies including speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and behavioural interventions are provided.”

Besides this, the participants of Kerala mentioned various cells and facilities provided to CwDs like transgender cell, disability commissions cell, dedicated EIE cell, Additional Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAD), accessible IT infrastructure, tactile signs, mobility or visual aids, signage in all schools, special pavements, provision for UDIDs, health cards, safety trainings, and inclusive sports training.

A provision of scholarship and other allowances to CwDs were also mentioned by the participants of Uttarakhand including health check-ups and safety and security. They stated, “Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) team comes for health check-up, children with severe disabilities are referred and some NGOs also come for eye check-up, they are also given spectacles. The Judo Karate team also comes to provide Judo training.”

- **Early Screening and Identification:** The participants of Kerala state focused on early screening and intervention through District Early Intervention Centres (DEICs) in collaboration with various bodies including rehabilitation centres, special

schools, and other bodies. Project Anuyatra is an initiative for autistic children in which early detection, empowering programmes for parents, and skill development of children are focused.

Under the Kerala Social Security Mission (KSSM) scheme, Sruthitharangam, cochlear implantation of young children (age group 0–5 years) was initiated. Through the BUDS schools, Kerala (care centres) for CwDs and Shalabham, screening of new born babies in government hospitals are conducted.

With the help of SSK, various programmes for early screening and identification of disabilities were organised. In all BRCs, facilities are ensured and guidelines have been prepared for medical camp and doctors who have expertise in the field to conduct medical camps. Guidelines for teachers for screening have also been prepared.

Uttarakhand participants mentioned that regular check-ups at school and block level camps for early screening and identification of CwDs were conducted.

Block-wise medical camps are specifically arranged for the identification of these children at the district level. The Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK), Uttarakhand team conducts yearly check-ups. Regular health check-up camps are organised in schools to identify health problems among children.

One of the participants mentioned the colocation of Anganwadis with the regular schools, “The state has been working to locate Anganwadis and is forming policies to align with the NEP 2020 norms. Bal Vatika centers have been opened in Anganwadis and schools.”

- Home-based Education: For home-based education (HBE), Kerala’s key functionaries mentioned Changathikkoottam, a programme by SSK, in which regular visits of special education teachers to homes of children with severe disabilities were initiated.

One of the participants stated, “special education teachers visit bedridden child once in a week and separate online materials are developed for home-based children (available at ssakerala.in). Peer-mentors visit the home of HBE children during festivals and holidays, and play with

them. Virtual classrooms are also functioning for bedridden children.” Further, one of the participants stated, “separate format is developed to record the development of students under home-based education. The IEPs are provided and reviewed at regular intervals. Sahitham, a mentoring portal is created for assessing the learning performance of all students including CwDs.”

The HBE initiatives were also emphasised by the participants of Uttarakhand, “a special educator has been appointed by the government in every block. They visit the homes of children and identify them, do their documentation, if there is any lack or document missing, then parents are counselled. They are informed about government schemes.” Ek Prayas, a module for home-based children with special needs’ parents and revision of the module were mentioned.

- Collaboration: Collaboration with various organisations and NGOs were emphasised by the Kerala participants, including the National Institute of Physical Medical and Rehabilitation (NIPMR) and Composite Regional Centre (CRC), for the empowerment of persons with disabilities, health department, rotary club, lions club, autism club, and various health departments to support CwDs.

Uttarakhand participants mentioned that “the state has collaboration with various NGOs and institutions including the National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities, Vision mPower (refer as Vision Empower), Rafale, Raphael Cheshire Home, Bajaj Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, ALIMCO (Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation of India), and Azim Premji foundation to strengthen inclusive schooling.”

Both the state functionaries had emphasised the role of DIETs and SCERTs in the action research on inclusion. One of the participants from the Kerala state mentioned, “action research was started under the leaderships of DIETs and few states started action research about inclusive education under SSK and SCERT.” Interestingly, other participants from Kerala also highlighted that “action research has been started in various areas also achievement of children with special needs’ general schools, out-of-school children, and teacher training need analysis.

- **In-service training:** The role of the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) was also emphasised by participants in teacher training. Through a special cell it provides special education training on special education programmes with focus on skills and pedagogical tools. This was supported by one of the participants of Kerala, “we have regular training programmes for teachers on different subjects and the module is normally prepared by the SCERT especially during summer vacation.” Further, the status of training at district level were mentioned by the Uttarakhand state functionaries, “training programmes at the district level are conducted to sensitise the associated officers and employees and various professional development

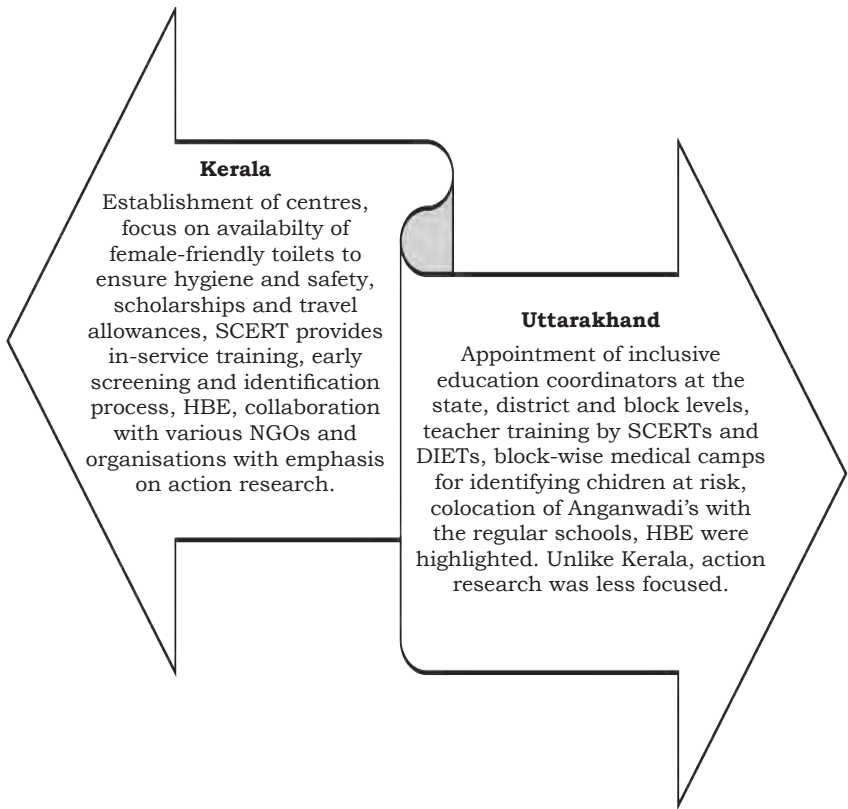


Figure 2: Inclusive practices by states

training programmes are conducted for the teachers. The SCERT conducts and monitors the training programmes as per NEP 2020 provisions.”

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of Uttarakhand and Kerala state functionaries on the educational issues, concerns, and the practices adopted for inclusive schooling of CwDs. The analysis of the quantitative data reflected that both the states reported high awareness of the educational issues, recommendations and provisions given in the NEP (2020), steps for early screening and identification of CwDs at all levels, mechanism to expand and strengthen the early-childhood education programme, in-service training of teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms at all levels, and the NGIFEIE. However, Kerala state participants reported low awareness of EIE cell, and collaboration with NGOs and organisations for the overall development of CwDs as compared to Uttarakhand participants. Further, it is revealed that Uttarakhand state perceived low on action research studies conducted by the state on education of CwDs as compared to Kerala.

The results of the study highlight that educators in many regions increasingly recognise the significance of inclusive education frameworks, which aligns with earlier research (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). This confirms that being aware of the policy is necessary for implementing inclusive education for CwDs. However, awareness alone is not evident of the effective implementation of the policy recommendations regarding CwDs.

Furthermore, in spite of high response recorded on awareness and steps related to inclusive education, both the states reported challenges encountered to realise full inclusion for the CwDs. The results of the qualitative data highlighted that the challenges which the state key functionaries come across are common. Numerous issues related to family, society, school, and system level leading to low attendance and dropouts are mainly crucial for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Consequently, the measures taken should be targeted in a concerted way for SEDGs including CwDs (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The findings of the study are consistent with earlier studies, which emphasised negative and stigmatised attitudes towards CwDs, inadequate teacher preparation, and less involvement of

community as the major barriers in inclusion (Burningham, et al., 2024; Mitiku and Mengsitu, 2014; Rosales and Rosales, 2019).

Lack of cross-disability training was one of the main barriers that was identified in the findings. Further, it can be considered that while planning the capacity building programmes for the state functionaries, similar nature of challenges should be considered. However, the depth and manifestations of the challenges may differ. It is in line with the results of the recent study by Tah (2025), which suggested that identifying the challenges is a prerequisite and crucial pathway for addressing and implementing inclusive education for CwDs.

The participants of this study highlighted the practices initiated by their states to implement equitable and inclusive education. Aspects such as establishment of centres, scholarships and travel allowances, by teachers' training SCERT, early screening and identification process, HBE, collaboration with various NGOs, and action research were focused. However, not much difference was revealed between both the states with regards to inclusive education practices adopted for CwDs. The results of the study suggested that although various uniform practices are followed by the states to implement inclusive schooling for CwDs, there are still barriers that need to be addressed and special attention be paid in this regard.

Numerous studies suggested recommendations for inclusion of CwDs (Lambrecht et al., 2020; Raj, 2024; Sharma et al., 2019; Uygur et al., 2020) including involvement of local members in school activities, revamping the curriculum of teacher education with practical exposure, training related to early screening, identification, inclusive pedagogy, need of adaptive learning resources (assistive devices, large print and Braille books), use of technology, proper convergence between different departments, and periodic monitoring of learning outcome of all children including CwDs.

The discussion on educational issues and concerns, and practices related to CwDs in inclusive schools is marked by an apparent need to build the capacities of the state stakeholders by providing professional development training programmes. This indicates that the results of the study are relevant for successful implementation of inclusive education in the light of the NEP 2020. The objective is to have an unparalleled education system by 2040, ensuring accessible and quality education

for all learners, irrespective of their social or economic status (Ministry of Education, 2020). Finally, the findings on the gaps in implementation of the practices highlighted the urgent need for more effective and inclusive capacity building programmes for the state stakeholders to support inclusive education for CwDs. Professional development of the pre-service and in-service teachers is essential for inclusive education (Vandervieren and Struyf, 2021).

Implication

The findings of the study suggest professional development training programmes on EIE for the state stakeholders responsible for preparing the action plan and its implementation for SEDGs with focus on CwDs.

Conclusion

The study examined the state key functionaries' insight on implementing inclusive education for CwDs. The educational issues and concerns reported by the state key functionaries of both the states were very similar to the barriers pointed by the existing literature. Since the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 the difficulties and concerns raised by state employees have represented the ground-level realities that have essentially persisted for more than 30 years and certainly without addressing these issues and concerns, inclusion is far from reality. However, the strategies to address these barriers may not be applicable or appropriate in their local context. This requires redesigning the curriculum and pedagogy to ensure that education be more relevant, effective for all students (Ministry of Education, 2020) and relatable to all communities. Integrating the local environment, language and cultural practices resonates with the principles of multicultural education and inclusive pedagogy emphasising the cultural and linguistic diversity in education including SEDGs with focus on CwDs.

Acknowledgement

The article is a part of research study funded by the NCERT, New Delhi as a part of PAC project.

This study is based on data collected during the Training, Need Assessment phase conducted under PAC Programme (Code 3.09), 2024–2025, DEGSN, NCERT.

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