Research Papers

A Study on the Status and Perspectives on Inclusivity of CWSN Students

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises inclusivity and addresses the needs of Children With Special Needs (CWSN) students. This paper critically reviews the education landscape in India, focusing on the status and perspectives on inclusivity of CWSN students, as well as enrolment and drop-out rates across various grades. The research population included students, school administrator staff, teachers, and parents. Data was collected through UDISE+, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires specifically designed for the target groups.

With the NEP 2020 prioritising inclusivity in schools, this study examined the challenges, from both the supply and demand sides, of the teaching-learning process for CWSN. Addressing these challenges is essential for providing the necessary support and resources required, to achieve the NEP objectives. The investigation highlighted the importance of increasing teacher awareness and training to effectively support students in inclusive classrooms.

Findings also revealed that many students drop out at different educational transition levels due to supply-side barriers, including inadequate infrastructure and a shortage of specialised educators. Nonetheless, some caregivers and guardians appreciated the recommendations outlined in NEP 2020 and expressed optimism that schools would proactively work to enhance inclusivity and address these pressing concerns.

Keywords: *CWSN Students, Inclusive Education, NEP 2020*

Introduction

Individuals have inherent values and capabilities that allow them to make their own choices and seek a life filled with dignity and

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meaning. Nevertheless, many individuals encounter distinct challenges arising from various disabilities, including physical, auditory, visual, communication, or cognitive impairments. These impairments significantly impede their ability to engage in daily activities effectively and necessitate a deeper understanding of the various dimensions of disability along with its implications for individual agency and quality of life (Ashfaq et al., 2015).

Given such challenges, the education system must be structured to ensure accessibility for all learners and address their varied needs, as every person is entitled to the right to education regardless of individual differences (Devi and Reddy, 2016). To effectively address learner diversity, inclusive education has been introduced to accommodate these differences, recognise their value, and empower those who have been previously denied education (Kiran, 2020). According to Sudha and Indu (2015), the concept of inclusion has its origins in the field of special education, which has developed various approaches to assist children with disabilities and learning challenges. This framework for inclusive education began to emerge in the early 20th century, with many countries acknowledging the importance of integrating CWSN into mainstream educational settings (Ireri et al., 2019). Globally, ongoing efforts aim to advance inclusive practices to meet the diverse educational needs of CWSN alongside their peers (Mpu and Adu, 2019).

Inclusion in Indian Education: Leading up to the NEP 2020

Since India's independence, various governments have implemented policies and acts to support CWSN students. Bhatty (2014) emphasised the necessity of a uniform school system that offers fair and high-quality education to all students, regardless of their social or economic circumstances. The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 was a significant milestone that laid the foundation for inclusive education as part of the broader goal of achieving equity. This vision was further strengthened by the Programme of Action (1992) and later reinforced by the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018), which promoted inclusive practices at the elementary level. The Right to Education Act (2009) marked a critical step forward by legally mandating education for all children aged 6–14, including CWSN, thereby reinforcing the principle of inclusive education (Samagra Shiksha, Ministry of Education, 2018). The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2006 and the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016), provided additional legal and policy support, expanding the definition of disability and obligating schools to provide accessible infrastructure, inclusive curricula, and support services.

December 3 is a significant day for people with disabilities and has been observed as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities by the United Nations (UN) since 1992. The primary purpose of celebrating this day annually is to promote the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities in all areas of society. Specifically, it aims to increase awareness about the challenges faced by people with disabilities across political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of life. Despite various acts, policies, and government efforts, the condition of children with disabilities remains very distressing, particularly in schools with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Janardhana et al., 2015). The NEP 2020 outlines a comprehensive plan to improve the situation, including disability-friendly infrastructure and educational resources to be made accessible in schools across the country. Despite progressive measures introduced by policymakers, this group of learners continues to face challenges and discrimination that serve as formidable barriers to holistic progress.

The NEP 2020 has effectively addressed the educational rights of students with disabilities and implemented significant improvements that were absent in the previous education policy. Though there have been efforts to bring this group of learners into the mainstream system, there is a need to understand the extent to which this vision of the NEP towards CWSN can cater to the requirements of the students. Chapter VI of the NEP 2020, directs attention to providing fair and inclusive education in alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sections 6.10 to 6.14 are dedicated to strategies and provisions for CWSN, with a strong focus on cognitive development, the use of assistive technologies, the development of resource rooms, and cross-disability training for special educators, among other areas. The document emphasises the significance of establishing an inclusive educational system, which includes schools catering to disabled and non-disabled students, integrating both students with and without disabilities.

This paper seeks to explore the intersectionality of challenges faced by students with learning disabilities in India from a supply-and-demand perspective. It critically examines the

enrolment and drop-out trends across different levels of school education since 2016 to assess whether these students have been provided with equitable opportunities. The paper also investigates the influence of NEP 2020 recommendations on the learning outcomes of students with disabilities, their interactions with teachers, and the physical accessibility issues within schools.

Conceptual Framework

To define the concept of inclusive education that underpins this study, it is necessary to first unravel its context. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 defines inclusive education as a "System of education wherein students with and without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities". The NEP 2020 adopts this definition, thereby resolving the longstanding confusion in India regarding inclusive education. By adopting this definition, the NEP 2020 aims to redefine the landscape of education in India, promoting a more meaningful and equitable approach for every learner. Chapter 6, Section 6.10 of the NEP 2020 states, "Ensuring the inclusion and equal participation of children with disabilities in ECCE and the schooling system will also be accorded the highest priority".

This study examines inclusivity specifically in the context of providing equitable access to education and participation of children with physical, cognitive, sensory, or learning disabilities. By narrowing the focus to this specific group of learners, the research aims to closely analyse policy measures and the challenges in implementing these, which affect their educational experience. The NEP 2020 calls for the proactive recruitment of special educators with cross-disability training and the establishment of resource centers where needed, particularly benefiting children with severe or multiple disabilities. India's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) in 2007 commits it to ensuring free, quality, and inclusive education as a fundamental right. Thus, NEP 2020 is a step toward a transformative environment, emphasising higher budgetary allocation, cross-departmental coordination, an end to segregation, and fostering sustainable transitions to the workforce.

Nussbaum (2013) posits that every individual possesses intrinsic worth and is entitled to a set of fundamental capabilities, essential for a dignified life, regardless of their social roles or economic circumstances. This theoretical underpinning emphasises the importance of fostering these capabilities to enhance individual well-being and promote social justice. The Capabilities Approach (CA), as articulated by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, recognises individual differences in age, sex, race, class, health, intelligence, education, and other factors. It acknowledges that external elements—such as social organisation, infrastructure, access to public services, opportunities to engage in social and political activities, and the freedom to express opinions and influence government decisions—can affect individuals' capacities. This perspective emphasises that everyone should have genuine opportunities and liberties to lead a life that they find meaningful. The focus is on providing equitable opportunities for individuals to live the kind of life they wish, based on what they are 'capable of doing and being' (Nussbaum, 2013).

Literature Review

In India, CWSN encounter a myriad of challenges and constrained opportunities across multiple domains of their lives. These challenges include barriers to enrolment in mainstream educational institutions, experiences of social exclusion, a lack of employment options, and an insufficient awareness of their entitlements and the services available to them (World Bank, 2019). Considering the population diversity and its accompanying challenges, India has made significant strides in implementing a robust legal framework, supported by numerous schemes targeting the 'back-to-school' initiative for CWSN in schools. However, the literature supports the view that infrastructural and capacity limitations, delays in the early detection of developmental issues, and lack of timely intervention in early childhood—particularly at Aanganwadis (grassroots-level bodies responsible for early childhood development)—remain persistent challenges (UNESCO Education Sector, 2019).

Enhancing infrastructure in regular schools enables accessibility for individuals with disabilities and equipping teachers with the necessary resources to provide optimal support. Attitude surveys and interviews have shown an improvement in teacher attitudes towards children with disabilities, and moderate acceptance of

inclusive education (Srivastava et al., 2017). The findings reveal that teachers agree that attending a formal and structured school system would lead to a dignified life, social recognition, and self-reliance. Das et al., (2013) investigated the current competency of regular school teachers in India to educate CWSN to establish an inclusive educational environment. The research found that almost 70 per cent of in-service teachers had not undergone any special education training or gained experience in teaching CWSN. The limited competency of teachers in creating and using instructional materials for CWSN students is also a vital issue (Coskun et al., 2009). A study by Johansson et al., (2023) reveals significant 'attitudinal readiness' among primary school educators in rural Haryana, while simultaneously highlighting enduring structural obstacles. Despite recognising the importance of education for all, teachers were challenged with inclusive classroom practices, thereby distancing themselves from responsibility, citing a lack of training and support. Additionally, the analysis overlooks critical institutional elements, including infrastructure, policy implementation, and community perspectives. The implementation of inclusive education has thus, been hindered due to a lack of proper infrastructure, inexperienced teachers in pedagogical practices, and insufficiently trained staff counsellors in schools to cater to the educational needs of this cohort (Shah et al., 2016). A study on inclusive practices in private schools in Mumbai by Das and Kattumuri (2011), shows that children with disabilities often experience significantly improved self-esteem and learning outcomes. However, they continue to encounter challenges such as inadequate teacher training, insufficient peer sensitisation, inconsistent resource-teacher ratios, and limited accessibility. The findings shed light on internal barriers but overlook broader structural issues, such as state-level policy enforcement and public school infrastructure.

Gowramma and Mohanty (2017) assert that inclusive teacher education is vital for effectively engaging children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Presented at a national conference in Mumbai this paper underscores that without properly trained educators, inclusive education risks being merely rhetorical. This aligns with research (Das et al., 2012) which calls for a paradigm shift in teachers' roles and competencies as they are essential for inclusive education in India. Despite policies such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and UNESCO's

inclusive frameworks, the practical implementation of these initiatives remains a challenge, with uneven implementation at the classroom level.

The transition towards multi-sensory and experiential learning approaches in all areas, including STEM education, is increasingly crucial. Science and Mathematics curricula may integrate tactile and visual aids, 3-D models, and modular materials tailored to diverse cognitive and sensory needs. Finland's use of such models for teaching geometry to students with visual impairments has significantly enhanced their conceptual understanding of spatial relationships (Takala and Sirkko, 2022). Moreover, implementing flexible curricular pacing is essential to support individual learning trajectories, complemented by assistive technologies such as screen readers, interactive simulations, and voice-activated calculators, as showcased in the United Kingdom's STEM accessibility initiatives (Winchester, 2023).

It is essential for teacher training programmes to focus on differentiated instruction strategies to alleviate cognitive overload and anxiety in CWSN students. Japan's inclusive classrooms exemplify this through 'universal design for learning' principles, promoting accessible education. In Australia, modular science labs accommodate students with mobility impairments, encouraging active participation. Teachers and support staff require continuous professional development focused on inclusive pedagogy. Workshops on adapting curriculum, using assistive devices, and developing inclusive assessment practices build both confidence and competence. Establishing peer-mentoring or buddy systems can also foster cooperative learning and social integration. For instance, in South Korea, peer-assisted learning models in science laboratories have been shown to reduce stigma and improve collaborative problem-solving skills among students with and without disabilities. At the policy level, implementing financial incentives for schools that adopt exemplary inclusive practices through grants, awards, or targeted resource allocations will bring in a systemic shift toward inclusion that transcends mere regulatory compliance. Norway's model of providing supplementary funding 'bonuses' to institutions that demonstrate quantifiable improvements in inclusive enrolments and outcomes serves as a compelling case study.

Disability as an area needs greater attention, and has come up for discussion in different SDGs, particularly those pertaining

to education (SDG 4); economic growth (SDG 8); employment; inequality; accessibility of human settlements (SDG 11), and data collection and monitoring of SDGs (SDG 17). Children experiencing physical, emotional, cognitive, and social difficulties are perceived as CWSN (Simorangkir, 2021). According to the data from UNESCO, 75 per cent of children with disabilities at the age of five and 25 per cent between the ages of five and 19 do not attend any educational institution (Goswami, 2019). India has a substantial cohort of CWSN, and the prevalence is exceptionally high in rural areas, where access to differentiated educational resources, including trained educators, has remained a persistent challenge. Elaborating further Johansson et al., (2023) studied ethnographic, multi-stakeholder policy narratives in the rural Indian government school context, especially prevailing community attitudes. It highlights the urgent need for interventions more attuned to the specific realities and complexities of these environments. In addition, societal attitudes and the stigma surrounding disabilities persist, contributing to the marginalisation of CWSN. Inclusion and fairness are essential for quality education and should be embedded in all aspects of educational policy (UNESCO Education Sector, 2019). In 2018, a nationwide survey, based on the document "Learning outcomes at the elementary stage" by NCERT, was conducted to evaluate children with disabilities in government and government-aided schools across 700 districts. The survey incorporated provisions such as additional time, scribes, and suitable adaptations tailored to the needs of this group of children to evaluate the status of the envisioned equitable assessment of all children. The CWSN enrolment accounted for 0.90 per cent of the total enrolment of children in 2018, with Kerala having the highest rate at 2.52 per cent and Uttarakhand having the lowest rate at 0.32 per cent (Ministry of Education, Lok Sabha, 2019).

Kumari et al., (2019) in a study emphasise that pre-service teacher education in India is predominantly characterised by only theoretical emphasis, with insufficient practical exposure to inclusive education. Notably, essential coursework related to disabilities is frequently offered on an optional basis and lacks adequate field-based practice. This situation highlights a significant disparity between the aspirations outlined in inclusive education policies and the actual readiness of teachers in the classroom. Educators often demonstrate a deficiency in the necessary mindset and skills, such as reflective practices required to effectively

address diversity in real-world educational settings. Education and the skills developed subsequently are the keys to a dignified life, and they are gradually gaining importance among the parents of CWSN students. This will be a gradual process, as the literature suggests a need for increased awareness among parents about the targeted government interventions implemented for students (Singal, 2016). Thus, this raises several research questions about the effective implementation of the provisions of NEP 2020 for students with learning disabilities, as the objectives towards inclusivity can only be achieved through community engagement and a change in perceptions. Thereby, areas to investigate include the drop-out trend and causes. At what level of education are the drop-out rates the highest? What is the current status of the organisational inputs required to address the situation and achieve CWSN students' desired learning outcomes? Are parents aware of the changes as per the NEP 2020? What challenges exist in implementing these provisions, and what measures should be introduced to address them?

Research Questions

1. To what extent have enrolment rates for CWSN varied based on gender and school level (2016 onwards)?
2. How are schools integrating inclusive infrastructure, both physical and human capital, into their systems?
3. What challenges do teachers, administrators, and parents perceive in ensuring effective educational inclusion of students with disabilities?

Research Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, with a focus on an inductive style to understand the complexity of the situation (Creswell, 2012). The quantitative analysis to investigate the research objectives is derived from secondary data collected from UDISE+, the Government of India (GoI) school data portal. A desk research study, using data from the last six years (2016–2022), has been conducted to examine changes in infrastructure availability, including physical and human resource availability in schools, to enable CWSN students to achieve their learning outcomes. Qualitative data were collected from observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with school stakeholders including teachers,

administrators, and parents. This study falls under the interpretive paradigm, as it focuses on gathering in-depth perceptions and experiences of various stakeholders associated with the education of CWSN students. Their subjective views, ideas, and knowledge are of primary importance in this paper.

Sampling

The study employs purposive sampling to select the five states that exhibit diverse socio-economic profiles and different levels of readiness in implementing the provisions of the RPwD Act. This approach facilitates a targeted examination of systemic issues and practices related to inclusive education for children with special needs. Thus, the sample incorporates quantitative data from UDISE+, and a dataset of 75 in-service teachers, comprising 20 school principals and 30 CWSN students. The sample was drawn from five states in India (Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Maharashtra, and Gujarat), as highlighted in Table 1. These states were selected based on regional diversity, representation of varying levels of educational and economic development, as well as the availability of inclusive education programmes. In-service teachers' data comprise 76 per cent females and 24 per cent males. The school principals' data consist of 65 per cent females and 35 per cent males. Also included as a sample in this study were 25 parents, including 30 students' narratives. The researchers collected the data through a questionnaire (Google Form), in-depth personal interviews, and Focused Group Discussions (FGD) via Google Meet.

Table 1: Sample Size of the Study

Sample Participants	Questionnaire		Semi-structured Interview	Focus Group Discussion
In-service teachers	75		25	15
	Female	53		
	Male	22		
School Principals	20		10	5
	Female	13		
	Male	7		
Parents	—		15 Including Female and Male	—
Students	—		30 Including Female and Male	—

Tools

To identify and understand the challenges faced by CWSN students, the researchers developed a self-constructed questionnaire

consisting of 15 questions for qualitative data collection. It was conducted with teachers and principals of schools that have CWSN students. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with teachers, principals, parents, and students. During the FGD with stakeholders, the themes discussed with the respondents included their awareness of the NEP 2020 provisions regarding inclusive education, pedagogical practices, infrastructure availability, challenges faced, and support from stakeholders. Various existing documents—school infrastructure plans to make the building accessible, policy documents on inclusion, student attendance registers, student learning records, and meeting records with parents, as well as awareness programmes conducted among mainstream students—were also analysed, along with secondary data from UDISE+. The tools were validated by reviewing experts in the area of Special Education, and they were tested on a pilot group to ensure clarity and reliability. Additionally, using data from multiple stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, and parents has supported the validity and depth of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The NEP 2020 has garnered acclaim for its aim to provide universal access to education for all children across the nation. According to the Government of India, this education policy primarily aims to introduce a new era of inclusivity in the educational system by setting a new direction. Disability often acts as a significant barrier to children's access to educational opportunities, hindering their educational attainment, which is a fundamental right. This is underscored by the data showing that only 50 per cent of the disabled population in India is literate (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016). Within the age group of 3 to 35 years, only around 62.5 per cent of individuals with some forms of disability have been able to attend school (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016).

RQ 1: To what extent have enrolment rates for CWSN varied based on gender and school level (2016 onwards)?

One core issue that needs to be addressed is the low enrolment rates among CWSN students, as well as the observed steep decline in enrolment, particularly during the transition to different levels of school education, as shown in Figure 1. Enrolment rates typically falls at the transition from Grade 5 to Grade 6, then on completing

Grade 8, as evident for all years. A sharp fall occurs again at the transition from Grade 10 to Grade 11, with approximately only 30 per cent of enrolled students in Grade 1 moving to Grade 12. During the FGD, the researchers asked the respondents about low enrolment rates among CWSN students. During the FGD, one of the respondents said, "It is essential for us to understand the various needs and challenges CWSN students face when it comes to enrolment. There are various barriers within the system; one is the lack of awareness among parents about available support and services, as well as policies. Most parents have a negative attitude towards their children and do not send them to school to avoid social stigma". One of the teachers also mentioned, "Even though the government enrols various policies and few parents are aware, since there is no safe transport available in many regions, it is difficult for students to reach school, which can be the reason for low enrolment". These statements by respondents are a cause for concern, as falling enrolment rates in higher grades would result in very low enrolment level, thereby significantly lowering the chances of employability, as well as decreasing the chances for a dignified life for persons with disabilities.

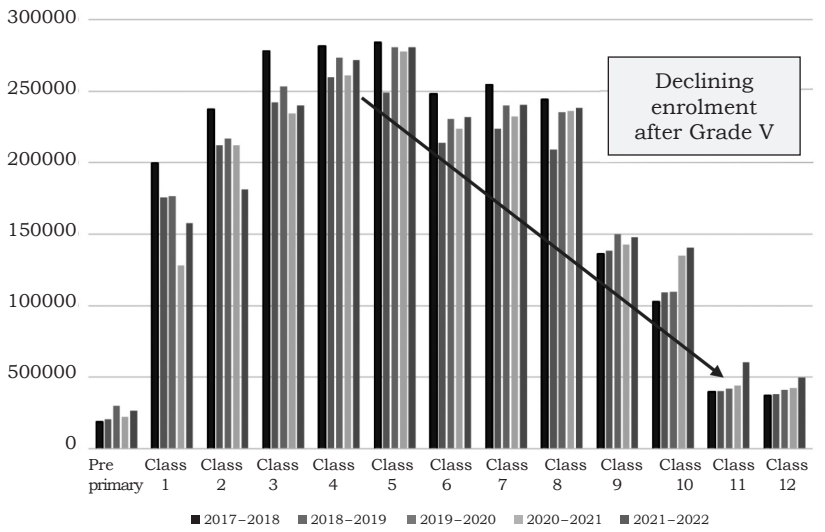

Figure 1: Gender and grade-wise enrolment of CWSN students
Source: UDISE+, GoI

Pre-primary enrolment rates also have been significantly low throughout, as evidenced by UDISE+ data, primarily due to the non-identification of neuro-diverse and challenged students at an early age. The researchers asked questions related to pre-primary enrolments, such as on what basis are teachers identifying neurodiverse students with challenges? Experts revealed, "There is a lack of awareness among teachers and caregivers about the signs of neuro-diversity and special needs in young children, and then it becomes difficult to identify the challenges children face". They further elaborated, "The long prevailing issue with pre-primary schools is the high teacher-student ratio in the Indian context; this is one of the major obstacles in the teaching-learning process". Additionally, as noted by the teachers, they are required to undertake additional administrative responsibilities, leaving them with very little time to develop the expertise needed to attend to the needs of CWSN children. The study also found that various types of pre-schools lack the necessary facilities for CWSN. Gowramma et. al, (2018) also noted that, although CWSN are enrolled, they are unable to attend the Anganwadi Centres because the community lacks awareness about the available facilities and the significance of early intervention. Even Anganwadi employees are not sensitised towards the behaviour of CWSN children and shun them away, leaving parents with no other option but to keep their children at home. The high drop-out rate of CWSN students is a result of both supply and demand factors. Supply-side barriers are primarily due to or enhanced by issues related to governance, financial constraints, lack of trained special educators, and infrastructural bottlenecks.

During the FGD, when a question was asked about the fall in enrolment rates post Grade 8, one of the parents replied, "As our child gets older, we've found that the gap between their educational requirements and what mainstream schools can offer widens. Many schools lack the necessary accommodations and support systems beyond elementary levels, making finding a suitable educational environment for our child increasingly difficult. We've experienced challenges finding secondary schools equipped to provide the level of support our child needs. Limited resources, inaccessible facilities, and a lack of trained staff often force us to consider homeschooling or alternative education options as our child progresses into higher grades". The above response of parents elucidates that CWSN students face challenges as they transition into higher classes.

RQ 2: How are schools integrating inclusive infrastructure, both physical and human capital, into their systems?

According to data from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment under the Accessible India Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan Campaign (Government of India, 2015), around 71 per cent of more than 11.68 lakh government and government-aided schools have been converted to be barrier-free, with accessible toilets for people with disabilities. The government and government-aided schools fare better, with 57.7 per cent and 43.4 per cent of schools having ramps with handrails compared to 32 per cent private-unaided schools. Private-unaided schools and schools managed by other entities face challenges in providing accessible facilities, indicating the need for targeted efforts in these areas. In response to the question asked to teachers and parents on physical infrastructure, one of the teachers opined, "We have observed that children with disabilities encounter difficulties due to the infrastructure of our schools. For instance, not every classroom in our school has movable tables or designated seating". Further, one parent also revealed that, "There have been instances where my child, who uses a wheelchair, struggled to navigate certain areas of the school due to narrow doorways, corridors and lack of ramps". This indicates that the majority of the CWSN students face infrastructure challenges in private schools.

The NEP 2020 primarily addresses dropping enrolment, with the legal provisions towards inclusivity being implemented through the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018) initiative. The Samagra Shiksha Scheme (SSS) has designated a budget of ₹ 3500 per child per year for CWSN who are enrolled in government, government-aided, and local body schools. Moreover, the skewed gender enrolment is addressed by allocating an additional monthly allowance of ₹ 200 per month for ten months to CWSN girls, in addition to the student allowance component. The Samagra Shiksha Programme (SSP) has allocated funds to train special educators who can address the educational needs of children with special requirements, starting from elementary to higher secondary levels. Additionally, the initiative includes the installation of ramps, handrails, and disabled-friendly restrooms to ensure that all children have unhindered access to schools (Samagra Shiksha, Ministry of Education, 2018).

Another finding that emerged from the data analysis is seen in Figure 2. The total number of special schools for CWSN students

has decreased significantly, from 11,123 in 2016–17 to 5,533 in 2021–22, although student enrolment in the same period showed a rising trend, from 21,69,171 to 22,40,356.

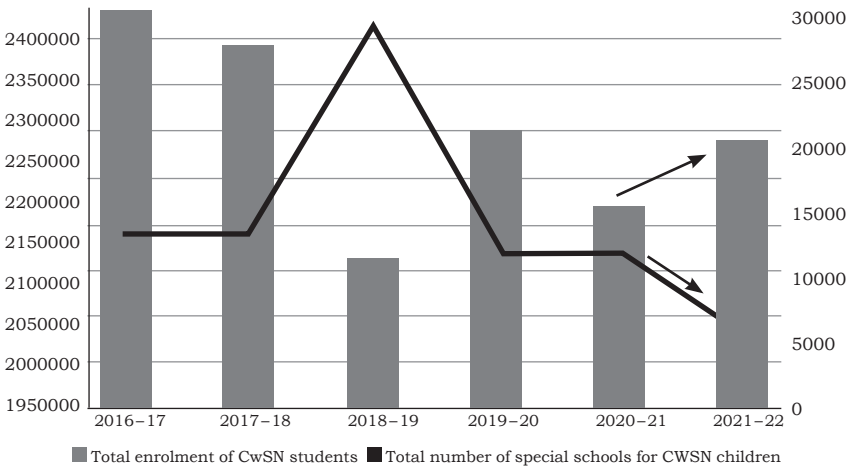

Figure 2: Enrolment trends of CWSN students in special schools
Source: UDISE+, GoI

In relation to the above statement, one of the teachers opined that the possible reason could be, "Schools may be working towards integrating CWSN students into mainstream classrooms rather than segregating them in separate special schools". Under the rebooted SSS, to attain the true essence of inclusivity in education, most of the 22.5 lakh CWSN students will attend regular schools, where special educators will train teachers, ensuring the right to inclusive education in the true sense. These steps align with the vision of the NEP 2020. The Department of School Education and Literacy (DoSEL) has established norms for in-home-based schooling for students with 'severe' disabilities. Data reveals that the proportion of children with difficulties in speech, mental, and multiple disabilities declines rapidly in the higher grades, pointing towards the underlying challenges in providing inclusive education to all. Under the SSS, a traveling resource teacher will provide in-home assistance and guidance to students as needed. Additionally, regular teachers will undergo cross-disability training to enhance their ability to support all students, demonstrating the NEP 2020's commitment to inclusive education for all. Targeted interventions undertaken in accordance with the objectives of the NEP 2020, have led to a slight rebound in

enrolment rates. Consistent monitoring of policies and programmes will help achieve the aim of universalising education for all.

However, this raises the question of the availability of supply infrastructure to meet student needs. Student enrolment has been increasing since 2020, and policymakers expect this trend to continue. If special schools are reduced, the gap between the two will widen, as seen in Figure 2. The NEP 2020 envisions CWSN students joining mainstream schools, which presents a supply-side challenge, as schools must develop the required physical and human infrastructure, as also stated by the parents. Governance initiatives for inclusivity have allegedly led to an increase in schools with the necessary infrastructure, such as ramps and handrails. However, as seen in Figure 3, from 2016 to 2022, the percentage of schools with handrails only rose from 39.2 per cent to 49.7 per cent, representing a modest 10.5 per cent growth, with the highest annual increase of 4.6 per cent in the 2019–20 period. Similarly, the presence of ramps in schools increased from 61.3 per cent to 71.8 per cent, reflecting a modest growth of 10.5 per cent, which still raises questions about the overall pace and impact of these initiatives. However, there has been a gradual but consistent improvement in school infrastructure to support accessibility, particularly in recent years.

A positive development has been the rise in the number of teachers appointed with disability from 18,255 in 2016–17 to 50,280 in 2020–21 and 1,07,990 in 2021–22 (UDISE+). This can significantly impact the goal towards inclusivity because, as students see more teachers around them who share similar challenges and succeed in their roles, it will boost their confidence, possibly leading to increased enrolment rates. Appointing teachers with disabilities will positively influence community perceptions, making families feel that individuals with disabilities are valued in society and thereby, increasing their willingness to send their children to mainstream schools. This will lead to the effective implementation of interventions aimed at increasing enrolment and improving the quality of education for the CWSN students.

RQ 3: What challenges do teachers, administrators, and parents perceive in ensuring effective educational inclusion of students with disabilities?

The demand-side barrier begins with the non-identification of developmental issues in children, which is particularly high in

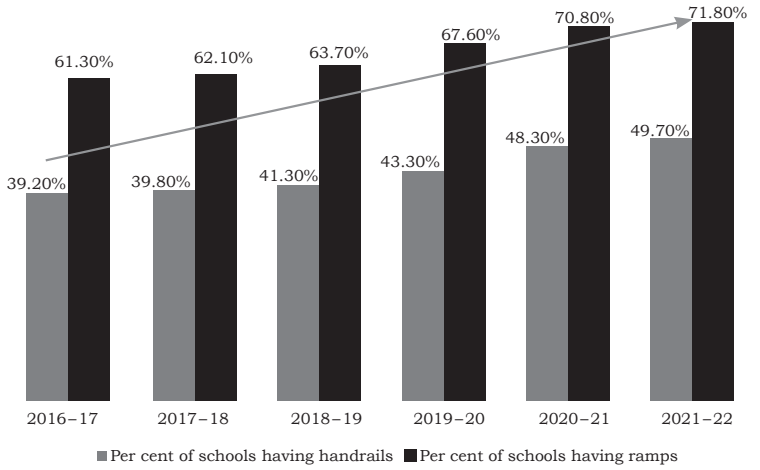

Figure 3: Changes in CWSN supportive infrastructure in schools (all India)
Source: UDISE+, GoI

rural areas, and there is a need for disaggregated data on this at the government level. According to UDISE+ data (2021–22) shown in Figure 3 there is a decline in the enrolment of CWSN students (Government of India, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Education, 2022). The NEP 2020 aims to overcome this under the SSP by identifying and assessing CWSN children through surveys, screening processes, and collaboration with health departments, which will help identify the specific disabilities at an early age to develop the individualised needs and requirements of students. The impactful interventions to be implemented across all levels of school education, which are proposed under the SSP scheme are; (i) universal access, which includes infrastructure development and retention, (ii) gender and equity, and (iii) inclusive education (samagra shiksha: an integrated scheme for school education framework for implementation).

The drop-out rates, as a demand-side challenge, are also high due to the costs incurred by families in educating CWSN students, especially those from economically disadvantaged groups. The reason is that the private return on investment from education is often perceived as very low or negative in many cases. The fall in the enrolment rates shows a concerning rise of approximately 44 per cent for both genders after Grade 8, and this rate increases to about 58 per cent while transitioning to Grade 11. Surprisingly, the drop is more pronounced amongst boys vis-à-vis girls, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Percentage (%) Drop in CWSN Enrolment Rates Transitioning from Grade 8 to Grade 11

Year	Girls	Boys
2017–2018	44.07	44.43
2018–2019	33.42	33.98
2019–2020	36.19	36.44
2020–2021	39.11	39.85
2021–2022	37.21	38.49

It is observed that when enrolment declines for one gender, it also tends to decline for the other, indicating that shared systemic factors, rather than issues specific to either gender, are influencing the drop-out rates. In the early years, a marked drop is observed in 2017–18. This suggests that external factors, such as policy changes, socio-economic challenges, or accessibility issues, may have influenced the transition process for students with special needs. Overall, the moderate fluctuations in enrolment rates over the years highlight that, while variations do occur, they affect both girls and boys similarly. This reinforces the notion that addressing systemic issues could lead to improved educational outcomes for all students, fostering a more equitable learning environment.

The variations in the enrolment of CWSN underscore the necessity for long-term, data-driven interventions aimed at facilitating smoother transitions between educational grades. Although policies such as the NEP 2020 acknowledge the significance of inclusivity, the successful execution and ongoing evaluation of these initiatives are crucial for addressing existing disparities, and ensuring continuous educational opportunities for all students with special needs. Despite this progress, there is still room for improvement to ensure inclusive access for all students. In due course, the measures undertaken to overcome supply-side bottlenecks will create demand for educational services and help raise enrolment rates, which drastically declined post COVID-19.

A few parents and teachers shared, "This increase is a positive sign of progress towards greater inclusivity in our education system. It indicates that schools are becoming more aware of CWSN students' needs and taking steps to accommodate them effectively. With proper infrastructure in place, teachers can focus more on teaching and less on navigating physical barriers within the school. It also enables us to support our special needs students

better and provide them with the resources they need to succeed". To overcome this potential barrier, the NEP 2020 recommends establishing 'school complexes' to efficiently use scarce resources to provide equitable educational opportunities as a possible panacea. A complex would include one secondary school and all lower-grade schools, including Anganwadi, within a 5–10 km radius. The sharing of trained special educators within a defined area and teaching-learning resources would enhance learning levels among CWSN students in all the schools attached to the complex, thereby leading to greater inclusivity. The National Council for Teacher Education (2022) recommends, "Schools and school complexes will get resources to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities. This includes hiring special educators trained to work with individuals with various impairments. Additionally, resource centres will be established in areas where they are required, particularly for children with severe or multiple disabilities".

One of the critical performance indicators leading towards desirable learning outcomes for CWSN students is the pupil-teacher ratio. According to the recent amendment to the RTE Act (2009), the norm is one special education teacher for every 10 students from Grades 1–5, and 1:15 for upper primary and above. To tackle a significant challenge faced by CWSN students due to a skewed PTR in India, Rajneesh Kumar Pandey filed a petition under Article 32 in the Supreme Court of India, emphasising the necessity of appointing 73,888 special teachers regularly to educate 3,69,443 children with special needs in Uttar Pradesh, and a similar number in Punjab to meet the required P TR (Iyer, 2021). The CWSN-trained teachers currently stand at 7,41,820 for 2021–22 [UDISE+, (GoI)], more than 50 per cent increase from 3,19,776 in 2016–17. Capacity building for special educators must be an ongoing process.

Perspectives of Teachers and Administrators related to CWSN Students

The responses from teachers and administrators collected via the questionnaire were analysed using qualitative methods. The responses were on a five-category Likert scale Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD). Some of the students' and teachers' verbal responses are also included. The graphical representation of teachers' and administrators' responses is shown below in Figure 4.

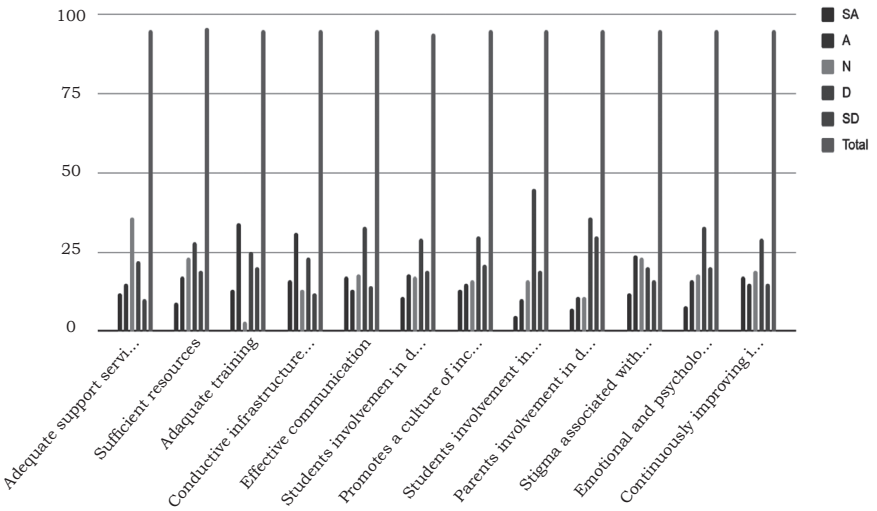

Figure 4: Perspectives of administrators and teachers

According to Figure 4, Statement 1 data indicates a neutral stance among 36 respondents regarding the adequacy of support services for CWSN students. However, a significant proportion of respondents disagree or strongly disagree, suggesting potential areas for improvement or further assessment to address deficiencies in the support system. As one of the teachers responded, "Simply ensuring the availability of the necessary items is not enough. It is necessary to adequately educate and train the permanent teachers for them to comprehend the individual requirements of each student". Figure 4 reveals inconsistencies in school preparedness for inclusivity, with varying perceptions among teachers and administrators. Gaps in resources, training, and infrastructure indicate that many schools struggle to meet inclusion standards. Parental involvement appears inconsistent, suggesting a disconnect between schools and families, in supporting CWSN. Concerns over stigma and inadequate psychological support highlight attitudinal barriers that hinder meaningful inclusivity. Additionally, disagreements over continuous improvement efforts raise doubts about the effectiveness and implementation of the policy. Overall, the data points to systemic weaknesses that require urgent, targeted reforms in training, resources, and inclusive educational practices. A total of 36 per cent government school teachers responded that

training programmes and physical aids arranged by the government or authorities helped them deal with students' issues, which in turn helped them manage their classrooms. A similar percentage of private school teachers disagree, stating they do not find these resources helpful in addressing student challenges.

A significant 59 per cent portion of respondents expressed concerns regarding communication, collaboration, and cooperation in the planning and decision-making process, noting that their input is often disregarded or not involved when decisions are made. Conversely, 27 per cent of the respondents agree with this statement. The data further indicates that CWSN students often miss out on opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, and there is a stigma surrounding these students within schools. As one of the students expressed, "I feel disappointed and excluded when I cannot participate in extracurricular activities like my peers. Sometimes, missing out on chances to pursue my hobbies and skills outside the classroom frustrates me. In addition, I feel alone and different from other people when I encounter stigma in the school setting. To engage and feel included in all facets of school life, I wish there were more initiatives to include and encourage students like me". Further data depicts that only a few (24 per cent) schools provide sufficient emotional and psychological support for CWSN students. One teacher pointed out that the large class size made it difficult to give individual attention to CWSN, resulting in their needs being overlooked. The teachers also noted that in their schools, the class sizes exceed the recommended teacher-pupil ratio, making it challenging to address each student's specific needs. However, most of them agreed with the final statement that their school is dedicated to continually enhancing support for students with special needs.

As gathered from the above responses, it is clear that there is substantial room for improvement concerning key facets for CWSN students. The higher-than-average classroom strength and increased workload were considered significant challenges by the teachers in managing CWSN.

Insights on the NEP 2020 and Equitable Education for CWSN

The NEP 2020 emphasises inclusive and equitable education, addressing Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and implementing affirmative actions for them. However, it is limited in outlining strategies for making the current system

more inclusive and does not provide guidelines for governments or educational institutions to achieve these goals (Singh and Yashendra, 2021). The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), responsible for training special education teachers, appeared to have not fulfilled its purpose. Now, the RCI is required to work together and collaborate with the NCTE to develop the curriculum for teachers and educators. Additionally, the NCERT should collaborate with the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities to develop a student curriculum and ensure that the proposed changes are implemented effectively. Furthermore, the policy requires B.Ed. programmes to include training of prospective teachers on educating CWSN. If teachers are interested in special education, they can enrol in a short certification programme after completing their B.Ed. However, there is a concern that special educators may not receive sufficient training during their 4-year B.Ed. Programme to effectively teach and support students with special needs. It is also quite challenging for teachers to attain expertise in teaching Indian Sign Language (ISL), braille, and methods for cognitive disabilities simultaneously. The NEP could have included the option for teachers to specialise in one area (Singh and Upadhyaya, 2021).

The Social Demand Approach (SDA) as a planning strategy may enable policymakers to effectively achieve the objectives and goals of the NEP 2020 and UN-SDGs with regard to inclusivity. This approach is particularly crucial in addressing the declining demand for educational services among students and the inadequate supply of teaching and learning infrastructure. The SDA firmly believes that education is an indispensable public social service and an inherent right for all who seek it. The SDA emphasises aligning educational policies with the needs and demands of the society. For students with special needs, this would mean understanding and responding to the societal demand for inclusive education that caters to learners with disabilities.

The NEP 2020 also outlines the establishment of cluster schools to promote greater inclusivity for CWSN students. However, instead of a well-formulated policy plan, it assigns the responsibility to state governments and requires them to adopt innovative mechanisms by 2025. The policy's aim of inclusive schools is unclear, as it does not address whether all schools in a cluster will be made inclusive or if only a few will be. This raises the challenge of students traveling a larger distance to

enrol in schools with inclusive facilities. The policy recognises learning disabilities but omits intellectual disorders, as well as other cognitive abnormalities, such as autism. Students with learning difficulties are marginalised in assessments conducted by the National Assessment Centre. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, 2016) and the NEP 2020 will be ineffective unless essential amendments are made to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or the Right to Education Act, 2009 (Ministry of Education). India has made significant strides in the education of CWSN students, but transforming social perceptions is crucial to ensure the effectiveness of the RPWD Act for such students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The above findings indicate a continuous decline in the enrolment rates during the transition from Grade 5 to Grade 8, followed by a substantial drop in enrolment between Grade 8 to Grade 10, with a subsequent decline thereafter. The accessibility of education for CWSN is profoundly impacted by a myriad of factors, as highlighted by Limaye (2016). These factors extend beyond mere logistical challenges; they encompass deeply rooted societal perceptions of disability and the consequent attitudes of parents, who may struggle addressing the disability-related issues effectively within the home environment. Furthermore, the prevailing societal attitudes towards disability often contribute to the stigma, subsequently affecting the integration and support of CWSN within educational settings. The physical infrastructure of schools frequently falls short in accommodating the diverse needs of these learners, indicating a systemic neglect in addressing accessibility. Additionally, a critical examination reveals that the inadequate training of key educational stakeholders hampers their capacity to facilitate an inclusive learning environment. This confluence of factors raises significant concerns about the equity and efficacy of educational policies and practices aimed at supporting CWSN. The current landscape demands urgent scrutiny and action to dismantle these barriers and promote an equitable educational framework for all learners. An ambitious plan has been rolled out to achieve the NEP goals, including enhancing disability-friendly physical infrastructure and expanding educational resources in all schools nationwide. A review of the literature for the inclusion of CWSN has articulated two basic facts. Teachers are the most critical factor for successful inclusive

education (Das et al., 2012). However, the literature (Banks et al., 2015) and our empirical research also highlight that teachers are not trained to teach CWSN holistically. Their challenges need targeted interventions to deal with issues such as low self-esteem, difficulty in self-regulation, and underdeveloped motor skills.

Forecasting the demand for education for students with special needs can be challenging, especially when enrolment rates are declining. One way to do this is by collecting demographic data through surveys at regular intervals, which can help demonstrate the demand for special education services. This could include historical and current data on the prevalence of different types of disabilities among various age groups, as well as drop-out rates among this cohort of students. Data collection from parents, advocacy groups, and community organisations will help in understanding the current and future needs of CWSN students. Specific data analytic tools will help analyse trends in types of disabilities within the student population, predict future demand through flexible scenario-planning methodologies, and identify areas where targeted interventions and strategic resource allocation can address the demand.

However, the circular relationship between demand and supply is of particular significance here. This dynamic interaction requires continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation to ensure that the needs of students with special needs are effectively met. Policymakers must prioritise investments in special needs schools, teacher training programmes, and support services to bridge the gap between supply and demand. When the supply of special needs schools, teachers, and resources is insufficient or inadequate, it can act as a barrier to the growth of demand for inclusive education services. The concept that "supply creates its own demand" is a fundamental economic principle known as Say's Law, attributed to the classical economist Jean-Baptiste Say. Enhancing the supply of special education services can stimulate demand by creating awareness, improving access, and demonstrating the value of inclusive education for students with disabilities.

Therefore, policymakers must focus on investing in the supply side of special education. By strengthening school infrastructure, teacher training programmes, support services, and assistive technologies, they can create a robust and responsive system that stimulates the demand for inclusive education.

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