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Challenges in Integrating CWSN in Regular Classrooms

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ABSTRACT—This research paper examines the multifaceted challenges encountered in integrating Children with Special Needs (CWSN) into regular mainstream classrooms. Despite global commitments to inclusive education, significant barriers persist in implementation. This comprehensive review synthesizes current literature to identify key challenges including inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient resource allocation, attitudinal barriers, policy-practice gaps, and limited stakeholder engagement. Drawing on peer-reviewed empirical research from the Asia-Pacific region, India, and global perspectives, this study highlights the complexity of achieving meaningful educational inclusion. The paper employs a mixed-methods analytical framework examining structural, systemic, and behavioral obstacles to inclusion. Findings reveal that successful integration requires integrated government oversight, enhanced professional development, localized research partnerships, equitable resource distribution, and meaningful collaboration among educators, administrators, policymakers, families, and students. This research contributes to the existing knowledge base by synthesizing recent evidence and providing actionable recommendations for educational practitioners and policymakers committed to advancing inclusive education practices.

Keywords—CWSN, inclusive education, special needs, mainstream classroom integration, teacher efficacy, barriers to inclusion, educational accessibility, differentiated instruction, disability-inclusive education policies

INTRODUCTION

The concept of inclusive education represents a fundamental shift in educational philosophy and practice, moving away from segregated, special-needs-only schooling toward integrated mainstream educational environments where all students, regardless of ability status, learn together in regular classrooms. Children with Special Needs (CWSN), a broadly defined category encompassing students with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, sensory impairments, and other developmental differences, constitute a significant and growing proportion of the global student population. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education underscore the international commitment to ensuring that all children, including those with disabilities, have access to equitable, high-quality education within inclusive settings.

In India, the Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009 and subsequent policy initiatives have mandated the inclusion of CWSN in mainstream schools. However, despite these legislative frameworks and policy commitments, the translation of inclusive education principles into effective classroom practice remains significantly challenged. Schools across India and the Asia-Pacific region continue to struggle with implementation barriers that undermine the quality and authenticity of inclusive experiences for students with disabilities. This disconnect between policy intent and classroom reality represents one of the central problems in contemporary special education scholarship.

The integration of CWSN into regular classrooms is not merely a logistical or administrative matter; it involves complex interactions among teachers, peers, curriculum design, physical infrastructure, resource availability, institutional culture, and community attitudes. Understanding these challenges in their full complexity is essential for developing evidence-based interventions and policy recommendations that can facilitate meaningful inclusive education.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Inclusive education has evolved from a marginalized concept in special education to a centerpiece of international educational policy. The Salamanca Statement (1994) and subsequent UNESCO initiatives established the fundamental principle that mainstream schools should accommodate all children regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. This philosophical shift reflects the recognition that separate education systems inherently perpetuate stigma and exclusion, whereas integrated schooling promotes social cohesion, mutual

understanding, and optimal learning outcomes for all students.



India's educational framework has increasingly committed to inclusive principles. The National Policy on Education (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusive and equitable education for all learners, including those with disabilities and special needs. The RTE Act mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14 years, including those with disabilities. State-level policies and national initiatives such as the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme have been established to support mainstream schools in accommodating CWSN. Despite these commitments, implementation remains inconsistent, with significant variations across states and school types.

The Asia-Pacific region presents a particularly important context for studying inclusive education challenges. This region comprises diverse economic contexts, from highly developed nations like Australia and Singapore to lower-income countries struggling with resource constraints. A recent comprehensive analysis by Beamish, Hay, and Yuen (2024) examined inclusive education implementation across seven Asia-Pacific jurisdictions and identified broadly consistent challenges despite significant contextual differences, suggesting that certain fundamental barriers transcend geographical and economic boundaries.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite global policy commitments and legislative mandates supporting inclusive education, the integration of CWSN into regular mainstream classrooms continues to encounter substantial implementation challenges. While numerous studies document the positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes of inclusive education for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, the actual practice of classroom inclusion remains inconsistent, fragmented, and often inadequate. Schools frequently struggle to translate inclusive education mandates into meaningful classroom experiences that genuinely benefit students with diverse learning needs.

Multiple barriers operate simultaneously at different systemic levels: insufficient teacher preparation and ongoing professional development; inadequate resource allocation and infrastructure adaptation; persistent negative attitudes and low expectations among educators and peers; gaps between policy directives and practical implementation; limited collaboration among stakeholders; and insufficient identification and early intervention systems. These challenges collectively undermine the quality of inclusive education provision and create experiences of marginalization, exclusion, and educational disadvantage for many CWSN, even within nominally "inclusive" mainstream settings.



RESEARCH GAP

While substantial research literature exists documenting the benefits of inclusive education and identifying various barriers to implementation, significant gaps remain in understanding how these challenges manifest specifically in Indian and South Asian contexts, how different barriers interact and reinforce one another, and what evidence-based interventions are most effective in addressing these challenges within resource-constrained settings. Most research on inclusive education originates from higher-income countries with different educational systems, teacher preparation models, resource contexts, and cultural frameworks than those prevalent in India. Additionally, while individual barriers such as teacher attitudes or resource limitations have been studied extensively, less research has examined how these factors operate as an integrated system of challenges that collectively determine the success or failure of inclusive education efforts.

This research addresses these gaps by synthesizing recent peer-reviewed literature to develop a comprehensive, integrated understanding of the challenges to CWSN integration in regular classrooms, with particular attention to contexts in India and the broader Asia-Pacific region. The research gap underscores the need for systematic synthesis of current evidence to inform policy and practice in educational contexts where inclusive education mandates exist but implementation faces significant obstacles.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research paper pursues the following primary and secondary objectives:

Primary Objective: To systematically synthesize and critically analyze current peer-reviewed research literature to identify, categorize, and understand the major challenges and barriers affecting the integration of CWSN into regular mainstream classrooms, with emphasis on evidence from India and the Asia-Pacific region.

Secondary Objectives: (a) To examine how different categories of barriers (systemic, structural, attitudinal, resource-based, and institutional) interact to shape inclusive education outcomes; (b) To analyze the evidence regarding the effectiveness of specific interventions and strategies for addressing identified challenges; (c) To identify gaps in current literature and highlight areas requiring further research; (d) To develop policy and practice recommendations grounded in empirical evidence; and (e) To contribute to informed decision-making by educational policymakers, administrators, and practitioners committed to advancing meaningful inclusive education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Central Research Question: What are the primary challenges and barriers affecting the successful integration of CWSN into regular mainstream classrooms, and how do these challenges manifest in the Indian and Asia-Pacific educational contexts?

Supporting Research Questions:

(1) What are the primary teacher-related factors (knowledge, skills, attitudes, self-efficacy, and experience) that facilitate or hinder the effective inclusion of CWSN in regular classrooms?

(2) How do inadequate resource allocation, infrastructure limitations, and lack of assistive technology affect the quality of inclusive educational experiences for CWSN?

(3) What is the role of peer attitudes, social acceptance, and inclusive school culture in determining successful CWSN integration?

(4) How do policy implementation gaps and inconsistencies between policy directives and classroom practice undermine inclusive education effectiveness?

(5) What evidence-based interventions and strategies have demonstrated effectiveness in addressing key barriers to CWSN integration in mainstream classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Inclusive Education and CWSN

Inclusive education, as conceptualized in international policy and scholarship, represents a comprehensive approach to education that welcomes, values, and supports all students within mainstream educational environments, with particular emphasis on those historically marginalized or excluded. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines inclusive education as "a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education." This definition emphasizes participation, presence, and the removal of barriers to learning.

Children with Special Needs (CWSN) comprise a heterogeneous group including students with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, sensory impairments, physical disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, and other developmental conditions. The categorization of CWSN reflects varying national definitions and identification procedures. In the Indian context, CWSN is defined broadly to encompass children with visual, hearing, locomotor, and mental disabilities, as well as those with multiple or severe disabilities. The wide range of needs encompassed by this category underscores the necessity for differentiated, individualized support within inclusive classroom settings.

Teacher Preparation, Efficacy, and Attitudes

Teacher preparedness represents one of the most extensively researched dimensions of inclusive education implementation. A comprehensive analysis of research trends in inclusive education conducted by Liu and Potmesil (2025) synthesized findings from 1,024 research documents spanning 2015-2024 and identified teacher attitudes, instructional competencies, and self-efficacy as central themes in contemporary inclusive education research. This longitudinal perspective on research trends reveals that scholarly attention to teacher-related factors has remained consistently high, reflecting recognition of teachers' pivotal role in determining inclusive education outcomes.

Empirical research consistently documents significant deficiencies in teacher preparation for inclusive education. Beamish, Hay, and Yuen (2024) conducted a qualitative analysis of inclusive education implementation across seven Asia-Pacific jurisdictions and identified "lack of adequate initial teacher education and ongoing professional development" as the most prevalent barrier across all regions studied. Their research revealed that pre-service teacher education programs frequently include only stand-alone units on inclusive education rather than integrating disability and differentiation competencies throughout teacher preparation curricula. This fragmented approach results in teachers entering the profession with limited foundational knowledge regarding special education, disability characteristics, differentiated instruction, and inclusive pedagogical practices.

Teacher attitudes toward inclusive education significantly mediate the relationship between policy mandates and classroom practice. Kazmi, Kamran, and Siddiqui (2023)

employed Structural Equation Modeling to examine teacher attitudes and self-efficacy in relation to inclusive education implementation in Pakistani schools. Their study, conducted with 230 teachers from both inclusive and non-inclusive schools, found that teachers demonstrated positive attitudes toward the education of children with behavioral disorders in mainstream settings. Importantly, the research revealed that teacher self-efficacy functioned as a significant mediating variable: teachers with higher confidence in their instructional abilities and classroom management capabilities expressed stronger commitment to including students with disabilities. The study reported direct positive correlations between teacher attitudes and inclusive practices ($\beta = 0.232$, $p = 0.044$), suggesting that attitudinal factors translate measurably into behavioral implementation.

However, research also documents significant numbers of teachers who hold reservations about inclusion. Negative attitudes often stem from perceived insufficient preparation, concerns about classroom management with students with severe behavioral or cognitive challenges, and beliefs that CWSN are better served in specialized settings where they receive concentrated specialist support. These attitudinal obstacles persist despite evidence that well-implemented inclusion benefits both students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers academically and socially.

Resource Limitations and Infrastructure Barriers

A fundamental tension exists between the principles of inclusive education and the resource constraints facing schools in many contexts, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. The World Bank and other international development organizations have documented that inclusive education systems, when adequately resourced, are actually more cost-effective than segregated special education systems. Research synthesized by the National Center on Inclusive Education Policy and Practice indicates that segregated systems cost 7-9 times more than inclusive models. However, the critical qualification is "when adequately resourced"—many attempts at inclusive education have failed because they have been implemented without providing necessary resources, resulting in cost reduction without corresponding quality improvement.



In India and other developing economies, mainstream schools typically lack specialized staff (speech therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists), appropriate assistive technology and learning materials, adapted furniture and architectural modifications to ensure physical accessibility, and trained teacher aide support. The research synthesized from low- and middle-income country contexts by the NCBI Bookshelf resource on Disability Inclusive Education indicates that assistive technology availability ranges from 5-15% in low-income countries, a dramatic shortfall given that technology access is often essential for students with sensory or motor impairments to participate meaningfully in classroom instruction.

Physical accessibility represents a particularly visible dimension of infrastructure barriers. Many schools in India lack ramps, accessible toilets, elevators, adapted classrooms, and other physical accommodations necessary for students with mobility impairments. Beyond physical access, schools often lack adapted curriculum materials, accessible digital content, appropriate assessment accommodations, and specialized equipment. These infrastructure limitations create de facto exclusion even when students with disabilities are nominally enrolled in mainstream schools.

Policy-Practice Implementation Gaps

The relationship between policy mandates and classroom practice in inclusive education remains inconsistent and contested. Beamish, Hay, and Yuen (2024) identified "policy implementation issues" and "inconsistent government policies and unclear action plans" as significant barriers in their Asia-Pacific analysis. They found "discrepancies between rights-based approaches and actual practice," indicating that policies embodying inclusive principles often lack the implementation guidance, resource allocation, accountability mechanisms, and enforcement provisions necessary to translate mandates into effective classroom practices.

In India specifically, while the RTE Act mandates inclusive education and various states have developed inclusive education policies, implementation varies dramatically by state and school type. Rural schools often lack awareness of, or resources to implement, inclusive education mandates. Private schools may resist enrolling CWSN due to concerns about academic performance metrics and school reputation. Government schools, while ostensibly required to accept CWSN, often lack specialized staff and resources to provide adequate support. This variability undermines the universality of rights-based inclusive education principles.

Stakeholder Collaboration and Family Engagement

Successful inclusive education requires coordinated collaboration among teachers, special education specialists, school administrators, policymakers, families, and

community members. Beamish, Hay, and Yuen (2024) identified "stakeholder engagement barriers" and "limited collaboration" as significant challenges in their cross-jurisdictional analysis. They found insufficient mechanisms for meaningful collaboration among these groups, resulting in fragmented, uncoordinated approaches to inclusion.

Family engagement in inclusive education presents particular challenges in developing country contexts. Families of CWSN often face social stigma, lack awareness of inclusive education rights and options, have limited access to information about their child's educational progress and needs, and experience communication barriers with schools. Additionally, teachers and administrators frequently lack training in family-centered collaboration practices and may undervalue parental input into educational planning and decision-making. These factors collectively undermine the family-school partnerships essential to supporting CWSN effectively.

Research-to-Practice Gaps

Beamish, Hay, and Yuen (2024) identified "limited local research in five of seven jurisdictions" as a significant barrier to inclusive education advancement. While substantial international research on inclusive education exists, much of this research originates from higher-income countries with different educational systems, resource contexts, and cultural frameworks. Developing contextually relevant research that addresses inclusion within specific geographical and economic contexts remains limited. This research-to-practice gap means that policy decisions in India and other developing countries often lack grounding in locally-generated evidence specific to their particular contexts, challenges, and resources.

Emerging Research Themes and Intervention Evidence

Contemporary research on inclusive education has expanded beyond documentation of barriers to investigate specific interventions and mechanisms for advancing inclusion. Liu and Potmesil (2025) identified several emerging research themes based on bibliometric analysis of recent publications. Effective intervention approaches include individualized differentiated instruction, collaborative co-teaching models where general and special educators work together, positive behavioral support systems, universal design for learning (UDL) principles that embed accessibility from the outset rather than retrofitting, and early identification and intervention systems. These evidence-based approaches represent practical implementation strategies that address identified barriers.

Research has also documented the importance of inclusive school culture and peer relationships. Schools characterized by strong commitment to inclusion, positive staff attitudes, visible institutional prioritization of inclusion, and deliberate peer awareness and acceptance programs demonstrate more successful inclusion outcomes. Conversely, schools implementing inclusion merely as administrative compliance without addressing underlying institutional culture and attitudes often experience less positive results.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This research employs a systematic narrative and integrative literature review methodology. The systematic narrative review approach involves comprehensive identification, critical appraisal, and synthesis of peer-reviewed literature addressing challenges to CWSN integration in mainstream classrooms. Rather than meta-analysis of quantitative data, this qualitative synthesis integrates findings across diverse research designs and contexts to develop comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena.

Research Design and Data Sources

Data sources for this research include: (1) Peer-reviewed journal articles identified through comprehensive searches of academic databases including Frontiers in Education, International Journal of Inclusive Education, Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, and other specialized education journals; (2) Recent empirical studies (2020-2024) examining inclusive education implementation, barriers, teacher attitudes, resource allocation, and intervention effectiveness; (3) International research reports and policy documents from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and disability rights organizations; (4) Specialized research on Indian educational contexts, the RTE Act, and inclusive education policy implementation; and (5) Foundational and seminal studies establishing theoretical frameworks and conceptual foundations for understanding inclusive education.

Inclusion criteria were: studies published in English in peer-reviewed journals or from credible institutional sources; research addressing challenges, barriers, or implementation of inclusive education for CWSN; studies conducted in diverse geographical contexts with emphasis on recent studies from India, Asia-Pacific regions, or developing countries; and research examining mechanisms, interventions, or evidence-based practices addressing identified barriers. Exclusion criteria included: publications in predatory journals or non-peer-reviewed sources; opinion pieces without empirical data; publications lacking credible evidence or citation trails; and sources that could not be independently verified.



Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis employed thematic synthesis organized around key challenge categories: (1) teacher-related factors (preparation, attitudes, efficacy); (2) resource and infrastructure limitations; (3) policy implementation gaps; (4) stakeholder collaboration barriers; and (5) research-to-practice gaps. Findings from multiple studies were integrated to identify consistent patterns, contradictions, contextual differences, and emerging evidence regarding interventions. The analytical framework organized findings along nested systemic levels (individual teacher factors, school-level institutional factors, district/regional implementation factors, and national policy factors) to illuminate how challenges operate across different scales of educational systems.

Quality and Trustworthiness

To ensure quality and trustworthiness of this review, multiple quality assurance procedures were implemented. First, all sources cited were independently verified through credible academic databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR) and institutional repositories. Second, only peer-reviewed publications and credible institutional sources (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, NCBI) were included; predatory journals, unverifiable sources, and non-peer-reviewed materials were explicitly excluded. Third, diversity of sources across geographical contexts ensures representation of different educational systems and resource contexts. Fourth, emphasis on recent literature (2020-2024) with inclusion of seminal foundational studies ensures currency while maintaining conceptual grounding. Fifth, critical appraisal examined methodology, sample characteristics, and generalizability limitations of included studies to avoid overstating conclusions or treating context-specific findings as universals.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The synthesis of current literature reveals five major categories of challenges affecting CWSN integration in regular classrooms, each comprising multiple specific barriers operating across different systemic levels. These findings are presented both as distinct domains and as an integrated system wherein challenges reinforce one another.

Finding 1: Teacher Preparation and Efficacy Deficits

Across all geographical contexts examined in the reviewed literature, inadequate initial teacher education and insufficient ongoing professional development represent pervasive barriers. In the Asia-Pacific region specifically, Beamish, Hay, and Yuen (2024) identified this as the single most prevalent challenge across all seven studied jurisdictions. Pre-service teacher preparation programs frequently lack integrated disability and inclusive education content; specialized knowledge regarding assessment accommodations, differentiated instruction, and individualized education planning; and practical classroom experience with diverse learners. Additionally, many practicing teachers receive minimal ongoing professional development to update skills and address evolving classroom challenges.

Teacher self-efficacy—beliefs about one's capability to teach students with diverse needs—emerges as a critical mediating factor. Kazmi, Kamran, and Siddiqui (2023) found that teachers with higher self-efficacy demonstrated stronger commitment to inclusive practices and more positive attitudes toward including students with behavioral disorders. Conversely, teachers lacking confidence in their abilities express greater hesitation about inclusion. This relationship suggests that professional development strategies designed to enhance teaching efficacy may be as important as knowledge acquisition per se.

Finding 2: Resource Scarcity and Infrastructure Inadequacy

Mainstream schools, particularly in low- and middle-income countries and rural areas, typically lack the specialized human resources, technological infrastructure, and physical accessibility features necessary to effectively support CWSN. Specific deficiencies include: absence of specialized staff (special educators, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, school psychologists); limited or no access to assistive technology (only 5-15% availability in low-income countries); absence of appropriate learning materials and adapted curriculum; inadequate teacher aide support; and insufficient funds for architectural modifications ensuring physical accessibility. These resource limitations create structural barriers that prevent meaningful participation even when inclusive education policy exists.

Paradoxically, research evidence indicates that inclusive education is more cost-effective than segregated systems when adequately resourced. However, many schools implement inclusion as a cost-reduction strategy without accompanying resource increases, resulting in simultaneous cost savings and quality degradation. This "unresourced inclusion" creates superficial enrollment of CWSN in mainstream settings without corresponding educational quality or meaningful participation.

Finding 3: Policy Implementation Inconsistency and Gap

Significant discrepancies exist between policy mandates and classroom practice. While India's RTE Act establishes the right to education for all children including CWSN, and various state governments have promulgated inclusive education policies, implementation remains inconsistent and often inadequate. Beamish, Hay, and Yuen (2024) found that even in developed Asia-Pacific jurisdictions, government policies frequently lack clear action plans, specific implementation guidance, accountability mechanisms for compliance, and consequences for non-compliance. In resource-constrained contexts, these policy implementation gaps are more pronounced.

Variability across school types is notable: private schools may resist including CWSN due to concerns about academic metrics and institutional reputation; government schools lack resources despite ostensible mandates; rural schools often lack awareness of inclusive education requirements; and urban schools demonstrate greater compliance but variable quality. This fragmented implementation undermines the universal right-to-education principles that inclusive policies articulate.

Finding 4: Attitudinal Barriers and Low Expectations

Despite overall positive teacher attitudes documented in some studies, significant attitudinal barriers persist. Teachers often hold lower academic and behavioral expectations for students with disabilities compared to non-disabled peers, resulting in reduced academic rigor, limited access to challenging curricula, and underestimation of potential. Negative attitudes frequently stem from inadequate preparation, concerns about classroom management complexity, skepticism about inclusion's effectiveness, and beliefs that specialized segregated settings provide superior support.

Beyond teacher attitudes, peer attitudes and social acceptance significantly influence CWSN experiences in mainstream settings. Students with disabilities often experience social isolation, peer rejection, bullying, and exclusion despite physical presence in mainstream classrooms. Research on school culture indicates that successful inclusion requires deliberate institutional and programmatic efforts to foster inclusive attitudes, peer awareness, and social acceptance—outcomes unlikely to emerge naturally without specific intervention.

Finding 5: Limited Stakeholder Collaboration and Family Engagement

Successful inclusive education requires coordinated collaboration among teachers, specialists, administrators, families, policymakers, and community members. Current research indicates insufficient collaboration mechanisms and limited meaningful engagement of these stakeholders. Teachers and specialists frequently work in isolation rather than as coordinated teams; families encounter communication barriers, lack meaningful participation in educational planning, and experience limited partnership with schools; and policymakers develop mandates without adequate stakeholder input regarding feasibility, resource needs, and implementation challenges.

In Indian contexts specifically, families of CWSN often experience social stigma, limited awareness of inclusive education rights and options, and communication barriers with schools that utilize educational jargon and operate through communication channels inaccessible to disadvantaged families. These factors undermine the family-school partnerships essential to effectively supporting CWSN.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings in Light of Existing Theory

The findings presented above can be interpreted through several theoretical lenses that illuminate the systemic nature of challenges to CWSN integration. Organizational systems theory suggests that barriers operate interdependently—teacher preparation deficits are reinforced when schools lack resources to implement best practices; resource constraints are exacerbated when teachers lack expertise to utilize available resources effectively; policy-practice gaps persist when implementation guidance and accountability mechanisms are absent; and limited collaboration means that barriers are not addressed through coordinated problem-solving.

Social-ecological theory recognizes that CWSN experiences in mainstream classrooms are shaped not simply by individual factors (teacher attitudes, student abilities) but by nested contexts spanning individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy levels. Barriers at any level can undermine inclusion; conversely, positive changes at multiple levels can create conditions where inclusion flourishes. This ecological perspective suggests that addressing individual teacher attitudes or specific skill deficits alone, without simultaneously addressing resource constraints, institutional culture, policy clarity, and family collaboration, will likely yield limited inclusion improvements.

The findings also align with self-determination theory in explaining why many inclusion efforts, despite policy mandates, fail to produce intended outcomes. When teachers feel pressured to include CWSN without adequate preparation, resources, or institutional support, they experience stress, reduced autonomy in instructional decision-making, and insufficient competence to meet student needs. These conditions undermine teacher motivation and likely result in lower-quality inclusive experiences than when teachers feel adequately prepared, supported, and autonomous in their professional judgment.

Consistency and Contradictions with Prior Research

The identified barriers largely align with previously established literature documenting challenges to inclusive education. Teacher preparation deficits have been documented consistently across decades of research and across diverse geographical contexts. Resource inadequacy in developing countries has been repeatedly identified as a primary implementation barrier. Policy-practice gaps represent a well-established phenomenon in implementation science literature. However, this review provides updated, current evidence (2020-2024) that these challenges remain persistent and often unresolved despite decades of inclusive education advocacy.

One notable finding worth highlighting is the emerging emphasis on teacher self-efficacy as a critical mediating variable. While teacher attitudes have long been studied, recent research increasingly examines how confidence in one's instructional abilities shapes commitment to inclusive practices. This shift suggests that interventions designed solely to change attitudes may be insufficient; enhancing teacher self-efficacy through skill development and practical support may be equally or more important.

Contextual Considerations and Generalizability

While certain barriers appear across diverse contexts (teacher preparation, resource constraints, policy-practice gaps), the specific manifestations and relative significance of these barriers varies substantially by geographical, economic, and institutional context. Beamish, Hay, and Yuen (2024) found "broadly consistent" patterns of challenges across seven Asia-Pacific jurisdictions ranging from wealthy developed nations to middle-income countries, yet acknowledged significant contextual differences. Lower-income countries face more acute resource constraints; higher-income countries struggle more with policy implementation and stakeholder engagement rather than basic resource availability. Rural schools face different challenges than urban schools. These contextual variations suggest that universal solutions are unlikely; instead, context-sensitive adaptations of evidence-based principles are necessary.

For Indian contexts specifically, the substantial size and complexity of the educational system, the heterogeneity across states, the convergence of inclusion mandates with severe resource constraints, and the persistence of social stigma around disability combine to create unique implementation challenges. While research from higher-income countries provides valuable conceptual frameworks and evidence regarding intervention effectiveness, direct transfer of these approaches to Indian contexts requires careful adaptation and culturally-informed modification.

Integration of Identified Challenges as Interacting Systems

While the five primary challenge categories have been presented as distinct domains, the research evidence strongly suggests these operate as interconnected systems. Consider the following illustrative scenario: A government school receives a policy mandate to include CWSN (policy level) but teachers lack specialized training in assessment accommodation and differentiated instruction (individual teacher level); the school has limited resources for assistive technology or teacher aide support (organizational resource level); the school culture does not prioritize inclusion and peer attitudes toward students with disabilities are negative (institutional culture level); and families of CWSN lack understanding of their rights and communication channels with the school (stakeholder engagement level). In this scenario, addressing teacher training alone would be insufficient because resource limitations would prevent implementation of learned strategies; institutional culture barriers would undermine teacher efforts; and family disengagement would limit support outside the classroom. Effective systemic change requires coordinated intervention across multiple levels.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Policy Implications

National and state governments committed to advancing inclusive education should develop comprehensive, explicitly-resourced implementation frameworks that clearly specify expectations, provide implementation guidance, establish accountability mechanisms, and allocate necessary funding. Inclusive education policies should not be treated as mandates that can be implemented through cost-reduction strategies; instead, governments must recognize that meaningful inclusion requires adequate investment in teacher preparation, infrastructure adaptation, assistive technology access, and personnel support.

Additionally, policies should consolidate responsibility for disability-inclusive education within the Ministry of Education rather than fragmenting this responsibility across multiple agencies. Specialized services for students with disabilities should be integrated into mainstream school systems rather than maintained as separate parallel systems. Policies must explicitly require inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream academic instruction; "inclusion" that relegates students to resource rooms or specialized programs does not constitute meaningful mainstream integration.

Teacher Education and Professional Development Implications

Teacher preparation programs should integrate disability and inclusive education content throughout their curricula rather than confining this content to isolated specialized units. Pre-service preparation should include: foundational knowledge regarding disability characteristics and learning needs across diverse disability categories; competencies in differentiated instruction and universal design for learning; skills in classroom assessment accommodation and individualized education planning; practical experience co-teaching with

students with diverse needs; and opportunities to examine and address implicit biases and low expectations toward students with disabilities. Importantly, this curriculum integration should occur not only in specialized special education programs but across all general educator preparation, recognizing that most students with disabilities attend general education classrooms.

Practicing teachers require ongoing, sustained professional development addressing specific classroom challenges and building expertise in evidence-based inclusive practices. Professional development should move beyond one-shot workshops toward job-embedded coaching and collaborative inquiry with colleagues. Importantly, professional development should address not only skill development but also self-efficacy building through practical success experiences and supportive feedback.

School-Level Implementation Implications

Schools should establish clear inclusive education commitments supported by dedicated personnel and resources. Effective inclusive schools typically employ special education specialists who work collaboratively with general educators rather than maintaining separate resource rooms. These schools implement co-teaching models where general and special educators share responsibility for all students. Inclusive schools establish formal structures for family-school collaboration, including accessible communication channels and meaningful parent participation in educational decision-making. These schools deliberately cultivate inclusive school culture through staff development, student awareness programs, and deliberate attention to creating environments where students with and without disabilities develop positive peer relationships.

Schools should conduct accessibility audits to identify barriers preventing students with disabilities from participating fully in academic, social, and extracurricular activities. Universal Design for Learning principles should guide curriculum and instructional design, building accessibility into initial design rather than retrofitting accommodations. Early identification systems should identify students with disabilities as early as possible so that support can begin when intervention is most impactful.

Research Implications

The identified research-to-practice gap underscores the importance of robust, locally-conducted research examining inclusive education in specific geographical and institutional contexts. India and developing Asian countries require more research conducted within these contexts addressing the specific challenges, resources, cultural factors, and policy environments that shape inclusive education implementation. Additionally, research should move beyond documenting barriers toward investigating specific interventions and implementation strategies that effectively address identified challenges within resource-constrained contexts. Implementation science approaches that examine how evidence-based practices are successfully adopted and maintained in real-world settings would provide valuable insights for practitioners.

LIMITATIONS

This research employs a narrative literature review methodology, which has inherent limitations relative to systematic reviews or meta-analyses. First, narrative reviews are subject to reviewer selection bias, wherein the reviewer's perspectives and interests may influence which studies are included and how they are interpreted. While efforts were made to include diverse perspectives and recent evidence, the possibility of selection bias remains.

Second, the review synthesizes research from diverse methodological approaches and contexts, making direct comparison of findings sometimes challenging. Quantitative studies reporting statistical relationships, qualitative studies describing contextual barriers, and policy analyses examining implementation issues each contribute valuable perspectives but cannot be directly integrated into unified findings.

Third, the research emphasis on peer-reviewed literature and established institutional sources, while ensuring quality, may have excluded grey literature and community-based reports that might provide valuable practitioner perspectives. Additionally, most published research originates from academic institutions and may underrepresent perspectives from grassroots organizations and CWSN advocates.

Fourth, the generalizability of findings across contexts varies. Barriers identified in Asia-Pacific research may manifest differently in other global contexts. Within India, challenges vary substantially across states, school types, urban versus rural settings, and economic contexts. The findings should be interpreted as broadly applicable patterns with significant contextual variation rather than universal principles.

Finally, this research, as a secondary analysis of existing literature, has not gathered primary data directly from educators, students with disabilities, families, or administrators who experience these challenges. Primary empirical research conducted with these stakeholders would provide more nuanced understanding of how barriers manifest in specific contexts and what solutions practitioners find effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Future Research Directions

Mixed-methods research designs that combine quantitative measures of inclusion quality with qualitative investigation of how barriers manifest in specific contexts would provide valuable insights. Longitudinal research tracking CWSN

experiences over time and examining how various interventions influence inclusion trajectories would strengthen evidence regarding intervention effectiveness. Implementation science research examining how evidence-based inclusive practices are successfully adopted, adapted, and sustained within specific institutional and policy contexts would bridge research-to-practice gaps. Participatory research designs actively involving CWSN, families, educators, and other stakeholders in research planning, data collection, and interpretation would ensure that research addresses priorities relevant to these communities. Comparative research examining inclusive education implementation across different regions and contexts would illuminate how contextual factors shape inclusion processes and outcomes.

Recommendations for Educational Practice

Educational administrators and practitioners should approach inclusive education not as a single intervention but as a system-wide transformation requiring change at multiple levels. Inclusive education requires simultaneous attention to: (1) teacher preparation and ongoing professional development; (2) resource allocation and infrastructure development; (3) explicit policy implementation frameworks with accountability; (4) institutional culture change emphasizing inclusive values; and (5) meaningful stakeholder collaboration.

Schools should establish inclusive education committees comprising teachers, administrators, special educators, families, and students to coordinate inclusion efforts. These committees should regularly assess barriers to inclusion, identify resource needs, plan professional development, address conflicts, and celebrate progress. Schools should implement Universal Design for Learning principles to build accessibility from the outset rather than as an afterthought. Schools should establish mentoring relationships between experienced inclusive educators and those new to inclusion practices. Schools should create formal mechanisms for regular, meaningful family engagement—not limited to occasional meetings but ongoing partnership in educational planning and classroom support.

Educational systems should invest in specialized staff (special educators, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, school psychologists) deployed to support mainstream schools rather than concentrated in specialized settings. Technology resources should be deployed to mainstream schools to ensure equitable access to assistive technology. Curriculum and assessment systems should be examined for implicit biases disadvantaging students with disabilities and modified to enable genuine access to academic content.

CONCLUSION

The integration of Children with Special Needs into regular mainstream classrooms remains one of the central challenges facing contemporary educational systems globally and in India specifically. Despite decades of inclusive education advocacy and policy commitments enshrined in international conventions and national legislation, barriers to meaningful inclusion persist. This research has synthesized current peer-reviewed literature to identify five major categories of challenges: inadequate teacher preparation and efficacy deficits, resource scarcity and infrastructure inadequacy, policy implementation inconsistency and gaps, attitudinal barriers and low expectations, and limited stakeholder collaboration.

Importantly, these challenges do not operate independently but function as integrated systems wherein barriers in one domain reinforce barriers in others. Teacher preparation deficits are compounded by resource limitations that prevent practical implementation of learned strategies; resource constraints are exacerbated by policy implementation gaps that fail to allocate necessary funding; attitudinal barriers persist when institutional change does not address underlying cultural factors; and stakeholder collaboration remains limited when formal mechanisms and practices supporting collaboration are absent.

Advancement of inclusive education requires coordinated, multi-level intervention addressing all identified challenge categories simultaneously. National governments must develop comprehensive implementation frameworks with explicit resource allocation; teacher education systems must integrate inclusive education competencies throughout preparation programs; schools must establish institutional structures and practices supporting collaboration, accessibility, and inclusive culture; and all stakeholders must commit to viewing inclusive education not as an add-on to existing educational systems but as a fundamental transformation of how education is conceived, organized, and delivered.

The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that meaningful inclusion is achievable. Research documents schools and educational systems where CWSN experience genuine academic engagement, meaningful peer relationships, social acceptance, and educational outcomes comparable to or exceeding those of their non-disabled peers. These positive examples provide existence proofs that inclusion can work when appropriate conditions are established. The challenge for policymakers, educators, and advocates is to scale these positive models, adapt them to diverse contexts, and ensure that every child with special needs experiences genuinely inclusive education within their regular neighborhood school.

The right to education for all children, including those with disabilities, is a fundamental human right articulated in international conventions, national constitutions, and educational legislation across India and globally. Meeting this right requires not merely rhetorical commitment but substantive resources, genuine institutional change, and unwavering focus on ensuring that every child, regardless of

ability, experiences belonging, engagement, and success in their educational community.

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