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THE EFFECT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION ON SCHOOL CHILDREN WHO ARE NOT DIFFERENTLY ABLE: ACADEMIC AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

Background: The discussion surrounding inclusive education in India emphasizes the importance of students without special educational needs (SEN). However, there is still a limited understanding of the differences between these students who are not differently able in inclusive versus non-inclusive classrooms within the Indian educational framework. **Purpose:** This study aimed to investigate the relationship between inclusive education and the academic achievement and socio-emotional functioning of students who are not differently able in Indian schools. It specifically examined whether inclusive education affects the performance and socio-emotional well-being of students who are not differently able students. **Sample:** A representative sample of 100 students without SEN from Indian primary education was taken. **Design and Methods:** Academic achievement was assessed through language and arithmetic tests aligned with the Indian curriculum, while socio-emotional functioning was evaluated using questionnaires completed by both teachers and students. Students without SEN were categorized into groups based on the number of classmates with diagnosed SEN: those with none, a few, or several students with specific types of SEN. **Results:** The study found significant differences in academic achievement between students without SEN in inclusive and non-inclusive classrooms, While some differences in socio-emotional functioning were also observed, **Conclusions:** The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the ongoing debate on inclusion in India. Concerns regarding the potential negative impact of inclusive education on students who are not differentlyabled students are challenged by the minimal differences observed between those in inclusive and non-inclusive primary school settings. This research strengthens the scientific evidence supporting inclusive education in the Indian context.

KEYWORDS: inclusive education; special educational needs; students who are not differently able students; academic achievement; socio-emotional functioning

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a vital process that enhances learning and understanding, broadening one's perspective and mental landscape. Its significance is evident in academic achievements and is further demonstrated through life experiences that help individuals establish their roles in society. The United Nations' declaration on human rights in 1948 recognizes education as a fundamental human right, applicable to all individuals regardless of age, gender, or race.

The term "students with special educational needs" encompasses a wide range of conditions, extending beyond disabilities or low intellectual capacity. It includes highly gifted children, those facing social and emotional challenges, and students with learning disabilities or difficulties that hinder their ability to learn alongside their peers. Recent United Nations policies advocate for the respectful treatment of all children and emphasize the importance of providing equal opportunities by integrating them into mainstream education. Key milestones such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the United Nations Standard Rules for the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) have been instrumental in ensuring that disabled children receive equal educational rights. These policies and legislations have paved the way for students with special educational needs to access the same educational opportunities as their peers.

Inclusive education has made a significant attempt to give equal rights in education to all students without considering any discrepancies among students. Inclusive education is a means of creating effective classrooms where the educational needs of all children, including children with special needs, are addressed (Priyadarshani & Thangarajagithi, 2017). The inclusion of students with special educational needs into regular mainstream classrooms has been a focal point of debate in education systems across the world (Schemit&Cargen, 2008; Zakaria, 2017).

Since early 1990, there has been massive interest in inclusive education policy among education policymakers worldwide. Inclusive Education for CWSN has been one of the major interventions of the erstwhile *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan(SSA)* RTE and



RMSA schemes Since 2010, there has been a notable trend in India towards inclusive education, which can be broadly defined as educating children with special educational needs (SEN) in regular schools rather than in special institutions. In this context, inclusive education specifically involves integrating children with SEN into mainstream classrooms. Alongside the implementation of policies promoting inclusive education, there has been significant debate regarding the implications of this approach. Many arguments in this discourse focus on the impact on students without SEN, often referred to as 'typical' students.

From the year 2018-19, *Samagra Shiksha* lays emphasis on improving quality of education for all students, including CWSN. Thus, this intervention is an essential component under Samagra Shiksha. The component provides support for various student oriented activities which include identification and assessment of CWSN, provision of aids, appliances, corrective surgeries, Braille books, large print books and uniforms, therapeutic services, development of teaching-learning material (TLM), assistive devices & equipments, environment building and orientation programme to create positive attitude and awareness about nature and needs of CWSN, purchase/development of instructional materials, in-service training of special educators and general teachers on curriculum adaptation, stipend for girls with special needs etc. The component also emphasizes the implementation of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 for children with special needs (within the age group of 6-14 years). In addition, separate resource support (financial assistance towards salary of special educators) is also made available in order to appropriately address the needs of CWSN within the school.

When considering the effects on students who are not differently able students, it can be argued that inclusive education may yield both positive and negative outcomes for academic performance. On one hand, children with SEN may require more attention from teachers, potentially detracting from the learning experiences of students who are not differently able students. This could lead to a decrease in the overall educational quality within the classroom, and children with SEN might inadvertently distract their peers. Conversely, there may be positive academic outcomes due to the implementation of more adaptive teaching methods and the presence of additional support staff in classrooms that include SEN students.

In terms of socio-emotional effects, it can be posited that students who are not differently able students in inclusive settings may become more empathetic and less anxious about differences among individuals. They might develop a greater understanding and form friendships with children with SEN, fostering a more inclusive environment. However, there is also the possibility that students who are not differently able students could adopt negative behaviors observed in their peers with SEN.

2. INCLUSION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS WITHOUT SEN

“An inclusive school is one that attempts to address the learning needs of each learner by reducing or eliminating barriers that are obstructing participation. An inclusive education system welcomes and educates ALL children regardless of their gender, abilities, economic situation, race, or religious beliefs.”

(Sharma & Singh, 2007: pp1)

A significant body of research has explored the academic impacts of inclusive education on children without special educational needs (SEN), yielding varied outcomes. Staub and Peck (1994) reviewed early literature and concluded that inclusive education does not influence the academic performance of children without SEN. Similarly, a decade later, Pijl, Nakken, and Mand (2003) found no evidence suggesting that inclusive education negatively affects the achievements of students without SEN, with some studies even indicating positive outcomes. In a recent analysis of 26 studies, Kalambouka and colleagues (2007) predominantly identified positive or neutral effects of inclusive education, with 58% of the studies reporting positive outcomes and 23% reporting neutral effects. However, it is important to note that many of these studies were relatively small-scale, often conducted in one or a limited number of schools.

Not only the students with special educational needs but also non-disabled peers benefitted from inclusive education. Gandhi (2007) found no evidence that non-disabled students were harmed by being educated alongside a student with a disability. Inclusive classrooms benefit all students (Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). A study of around 1,000 primary school students in the United States state of Indiana found positive impacts of inclusion on the progress of non-disabled students in mathematics (Waldron & Cole, 2000). Another research carried out in Italy found that those who had contact with students with Down syndrome held more positive and less prejudicial views about people with Down syndrome when compared to students who had not had such contact (Consiglio, Guarnera, & Magnano, 2015). Tafa and Manolitsis (2003) in their study showed that children educated in inclusive programs with children with special educational needs have increased respect, awareness, and acceptance of their peers' needs, develop fewer prejudices, and learn to be more helpful and supportive toward people with disabilities, according to parents' perspectives. Smith and Williams (2001) revealed that children without disabilities could be sensitive to the consequences of different types of impairments and generally have a positive perception of the capabilities of children with different kinds of impairments. Kalambouka et al. (2007) showed no evidence of adverse effects of the inclusion of children with SEN, indicating that most findings involved positive or neutral effects on children without SEN. Inclusive education is a practice of strengthening the education system's capacity to reach all learners. The experiences received by implementing the inclusive policy worldwide in many countries revealed that inclusive education is the primary strategy to achieve education for all. Apart



from giving equal opportunities, the research emphasizes that all students benefit from being part of an inclusive classroom.

Dyson and others (2004) performed a large-scale study into the effects of inclusion on the achievement of students without SEN. At regional level, they found no relationship between the inclusiveness of the Local Educational Authority and achievement. At school level, a small effect was found: in schools with higher levels of inclusion, student achievements were on average lower. Nevertheless, other background characteristics, such as entitlement to free school meals or mother tongue, proved more important and, according to the authors, the effect found was very small. In another large-scale study, though the amount of explained variance was very small, slightly positive effect of inclusive education on the achievement of students who are not differently able children was found (Demeris, Childs, and Jordan 2007). In a third large-scale study, Gandhi (2007) found no general difference in reading performance between non-disabled students in inclusive and non-inclusive classes. When more specific aspects were investigated, for most comparisons, there were also no differences between non-disabled students in inclusive and non-inclusive classes.

Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) described a major shortcoming in earlier research, which is that no distinction is made between different groups of students who are not differently able students in the vast majority of studies. If children with SEN require more teacher attention, teachers could make more use of independent working for the other students (Meijer 2001), which could enable intelligent children to make more progress in inclusive education because they do not have to 'wait' for their classmates. Moreover, if teachers need to cater for more varied needs and achievement levels in inclusive classes, they might make more use of adaptive education or ability grouping (Houtveen and Van de Grift 2001; Peschar and Meijer 1997), which might have an adverse effect on less intelligent students who end up in groups with other weak pupils (Houtveen et al. 1999).

Alternatively, teachers might lower the general level of education to cater for the children with SEN (Gerber 1995; Huber, Rosenfeld, and Fiorello 2001). This might benefit less intelligent children, because they would have less difficulty keeping up with the lessons. In scientific literature, only two studies made a distinction between different groups of students who are not differently able students. Dumke (1991, cited in Pijl, Nakken, and Mand 2003) found more high-achieving and more poor-achieving students without SEN in inclusive classes. The variance in inclusive classes was higher than in non-inclusive classes, indicating that there might be a positive effect for intelligent children and a negative effect for less intelligent children. Huber, Rosenfeld, and Fiorello (2001), on the other hand, found no differences between classes with and without children with SEN, but did find that an inclusive curriculum benefits low-achieving students.

3. INCLUSION AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL FUNCTIONING OF STUDENTS WITHOUT SEN

After doing the review of the available literature the researcher realized that there is a gap in knowledge as not much research has been done on the socio emotional effect of inclusive education on the students who are not differentlyabled. Most of the research talks about the positive effect of inclusive such as children in inclusive classes have fewer prejudices about children with SEN, they are more willing to play with them and they have a more positive attitude towards them (Nakken and Pijl 2002; Salend and Garrick Duhaney 1999; Staub and Peck 1994).

Brown (1982, as cited in Kalamouka et al., 2007) identified a detrimental social impact of inclusive education, noting that the inclusion of children with behavioral issues adversely affected the classroom climate and learning environment. Conversely, Staub and Peck (1994) found no evidence to suggest that students without special educational needs (SEN) adopt undesirable behaviors from their peers with SEN.

There is little information about the effects of inclusive education on various socio-emotional factors, including self-confidence, teacher-student relationships, and overall well-being. To our knowledge, these aspects have not been thoroughly investigated, although it is plausible that inclusive education could influence them. For instance, students without disabilities in inclusive settings may develop a more positive self-image by comparing themselves to students with special educational needs (SEN), who typically perform at lower levels (a phenomenon known as downward comparison), potentially enhancing their sense of well-being (Wills, 1981).

Conversely, it can be argued that inclusive education might negatively impact the socio-emotional functioning of students without disabilities, as they may receive less attention from teachers due to the increased demands of supporting SEN students (Peck et al., 2004). Furthermore, teachers may experience heightened stress in inclusive environments (Forlin, 2001; Forlin, Hattie, and Douglas, 1996), which could detrimentally affect teacher-student relationships (Yoon, 2002). In this study, we explored the relationship between inclusive education and the socio-emotional functioning of students without disabilities.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS



- (1) Is there a relationship between inclusive education and the academic achievement of students without special educational needs (SEN) in India?
- (2) Is there a relationship between inclusive education and the socio-emotional functioning of students who are not differently able.

Method

Participants: 100 students participated in this study who were studying with special children in an inclusive school of Delhi. Three categories were included. Students without SEN were categorized into groups based on the number of classmates with diagnosed SEN:

- Those with none,(no student with SEN)
- A few, (less than 10%)
- Several students with specific types of SEN(more than 10%)

Instruments

Background characteristics

Language and arithmetic tests

Teacher questionnaire on socio-emotional functioning

- *Self-confidence* (e.g. ‘This student gets upset easily’).
- *Teacher–student relationship* (e.g. ‘This student has a challenging relationship with me’).
- *Effort* (e.g. ‘This student often believes that their work is complete’).
- *Popularity* (e.g. ‘This student is well-liked among peers’).
- *Well-being at school* (e.g. ‘This student prefers to skip school’).
- *Behaviors at school* (e.g. ‘This student frequently displays disrespectful behavior’).

Student questionnaire on socio-emotional functioning

In addition to the teacher questionnaire, we utilized a student questionnaire to assess socio-emotional functioning among students in Indian schools. Given that younger students were not yet capable of completing self-report questionnaires, the student questionnaire was administered only to students in grades 6 and 8. To determine whether teacher observations aligned with student experiences, we included student reports as well.

The student questionnaire comprised 17 statements evaluating three dimensions of socio-emotional functioning:

- self-confidence in academic performance (e.g., ‘I am among the top students in my class’);
- well-being in the school environment (e.g., ‘I feel comfortable with my teacher’); and
- social integration within the classroom (e.g., ‘I have few friends in this class’; neg.).

Students rated each statement on a five-point scale, ranging from ‘this is completely untrue’ to ‘this is completely true. ‘The reliability of this questionnaire was found to be satisfactory to good: $\alpha = 0.75$

To determine the relation between inclusion and functioning of students who are not differently able students, the percentage of SEN students per class was calculated. Instead of using this as a continuous variable, different groups were created. We decided to make a distinction between students who are not differently able students with no students with SEN in their class, a few students(less than 10% with SEN in their class, and more than a few students(more than 10% with SEN in their class.

5. RESULTS

Language and arithmetic

Significant differences in language and arithmetic test performance between students who are not differently able students in classes without students with SEN, in classes with less than 10% students with SEN and in classes with more than 10% students with SEN.

Table no. 1 shows the comparison between the three groups on academic performance; academic performance of students was measured with the help of scores they got in the exams of language and arithmetic .

Comparison Group	Arithmetic		
	Mean Score	SD	t-Statistic
			Significance



Group A (80 students)	173.64	15.64	-	-
Group B (7 students)	155.73	17.35		
Group C (13 students)	125.75	16.12		
Group A vs. Group B	173.64vs 155.73		11.27	Significant
Group A vs. Group C	173.64vs 125.75		11.60	Significant
Group B vs. Group C	155.73 vs 125.75		2.34	Significant
Comparison Group	Language			
	Mean Score		t-Statistic	Significance
Group A (80 students)	188.64	14.24		
Group B (7 students)	167.13	11.19		-
Group C (13 students)	142.45	12.31		Significant
Group A vs. Group B	188.64 vs 167.13		5.07	Significant
Group A vs. Group C	188.64 vs 142.45		2.93	Significant
Group B vs. Group C	142.45 vs 167.13		2.74	Significant

T test was calculated to see if there is any significant difference in achievement in language and arithmetic of typical students. There was significant difference found between students in classes with no, less than 10%, and more than 10% of students with SEN. There seemed, therefore, to be a relation between the inclusion of students with SEN and typical students' achievement in language and arithmetic.

Teacher reports on socio-emotional functioning

The presence of children with SEN was not significantly related to teacher-reported self-confidence and teacher-student relationship of children without SEN: there were no differences between students who are not differently able students in classes without students with SEN, students who are not differently able students in classes with less than 10% students with SEN and students who are not differently able students in classes with more than 10% students with SEN.

There were no differences in teacher-reported effort and popularity between students who are not differently able students in classes without SEN, students who are not differently able students in classes with less than 10% students with SEN and students who are not differently able students in classes with more than 10% students with SEN. This indicates that, according to the teacher, the presence of students with SEN was not significantly related to effort and popularity of students who are not differently able students.

Finally, no differences were found on teacher-reported well-being and behaviour between students who are not differently able students in classes without students with SEN, students who are not differently able students in classes with less than 10% students with SEN and students who are not differently able students in classes with more than 10% students with SEN.

Student reports on socio-emotional functioning

The student-reports showed no differences in social integration and well-being between students who are not differently able students in classes without students with SEN, in classes with less than 10% students with SEN and in classes with more than 10% students with SEN.

There were differences in student-reported self-confidence between students who are not differently able students in classes without students with SEN and students who are not differently able students in classes with more than 10% students with SEN.

- Students in classes with more than 10% SEN students reported more self-confidence than students in classes without students with SEN.
- This difference was not found for students who are not differently able students in classes with less than 10% students with SEN compared with students who are not differently able students in classes without students with SEN.

This indicates that, according to students who are not differently able students, there were no differences between students who are not differently able students in classes with and without students with SEN, on the well being. Children in classes with less than 10% students with behavioural problems and children in classes with more than 10% students with other problems scored lower on well-being than students in classes with no students with behavioural or other problems.



6. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

We investigated the relation between inclusive education and the academic achievement and socio-emotional functioning of students without SEN, and whether this varied between more and less intelligent students who are not differently able children.

The results showed significant differences in academic achievement between students who are not differently able students in non-inclusive classes, students who are not differently able students in classes with a few (less than 10%) students with SEN, and students who are not differently able students in classes with more than a few (more than 10%) students with SEN.

This indicates overall relation between inclusive education and the academic achievement of students who are not differently able students. A more important finding of this study, therefore, was that there were indications of a different relation between inclusive education and academic achievement for more and less intelligent students who are not differently able students.

Similar results were found on different aspects of socio-emotional functioning: on the great majority of measures, no differences were found between students who are not differently able students in non-inclusive classes, in classes with a few students with SEN and in classes with more than a few students with SEN. Only for student-reported self-confidence did students who are not differently able students in classes with more than a few students with SEN seem to score better than students who are not differently able students in non-inclusive classes. This might be because students with SEN generally perform less well than students who are not differently able students. Students who are not differently able students in inclusive classes could probably compare themselves with students who function less well than themselves, which could have a positive effect on their self-confidence. Earlier research provides little evidence on the effects of inclusion on the socio-emotional functioning of students who are not differently able students, whereas inclusive education could affect these factors positively or negatively. Our research found indications that inclusive education has no relation with the socio-emotional functioning of students who are not differently able students: overall, there were no meaningful differences between students who are not differently able students in inclusive and non-inclusive classes, and possible effects did not seem to be covered by a different relation form or endless intelligent students who are not differently able students.

Finally, no important differences in the academic achievement and socio-emotional functioning of students who are not differently able students were found when children with behavioural, cognitive or other problems were included in their class. The only differences in self-reported well-being indicated that students in classes with one (i.e. less than 10%) student with behavioural problems or one or more (i.e. more than 10%) students with other problems experienced less well-being than students who are not differently able students in classes without students with these specific problems. This might be because students with SEN demand more teacher attention or affect the class climate in a negative way.

7. LIMITATIONS

- First of all, it is not possible to draw causal implications from the findings. We did correlation analysis using cross-sectional data. Although this approach makes it possible to observe differences—or the absence of them—between groups, it is not feasible to draw the conclusion that inclusion contributed to or did not contribute to these differences.
- The study's participants may have milder forms of special education needs. In India, special schools and inclusive education coexist, as previously said. As a result, schools may accept pupils with milder SEN while turning away those with more severe SEN.
- Another drawback was our ignorance of the specifics of each school's inclusive education implementation. Different arrangements may have been made by schools to include students with special education needs, and these arrangements may have had an impact on students who are not differently able children as well.

Major Findings

The findings of this study are interesting in the light of the ongoing inclusion debate. We discussed the various reasons for and against inclusive education in the introduction. Many of these arguments concern the effects on students who are not differently able students. For example, inclusion might adversely affect the achievement of students who are not differently able children, or students who are not differently able children might copy undesirable behaviour from children with SEN. This research strengthens scientific evidence in support of inclusive education. Earlier research had already indicated overall neutral or positive effects of inclusion (Kalambouka et al. 2007; Ruijs and Peetsma 2009). This study supports this earlier research, especially by finding no evidence for an alternative explanation for neutral academic effects



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