

## **Inclusive Education: Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of NEP 2020 with Special Reference to Children with Special Needs (CWSN): Review**

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### **Abstract**

Inclusive education aims to provide equitable access to quality education for all children, including those with disabilities, within mainstream schools. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India places significant emphasis on inclusive education, with particular focus on Children with Special Needs (CWSN). This paper examines the provisions of NEP 2020 that are specifically designed for CWSN, highlights the challenges in implementing inclusive education, and explores the opportunities that NEP 2020 presents. Through a comprehensive analysis, the paper aims to provide insights into the future of inclusive education in India, particularly in the context of CWSN.

**Key Words:** *mainstream schools, NEP 2020, Inclusive Education*

### **Introduction**

Inclusive education is an educational approach that promotes the full involvement of all students in regular educational settings, regardless of their differences. This encompasses children with disabilities, referred to as Children with Special Needs (CWSN), who may need extra assistance or adapted teaching methods to thrive academically. The core idea behind inclusive education is that every child deserves access to a quality education that supports their overall development, ensuring that no child is excluded due to physical, cognitive, or emotional challenges.

India, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), has committed to providing equal access to education for all children, including those with disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) 2016 and the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) have laid the foundation for inclusive education, recognizing it as a critical factor in the empowerment of marginalized groups. However, the implementation of inclusive education remains challenging due to various systemic issues, including infrastructural barriers, lack of trained teachers, and persistent social stigma.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced by the Government of India, is a comprehensive and forward-looking policy that emphasizes the need for an equitable and inclusive education system. The policy aims to transform the educational landscape in India, with specific provisions designed to address the needs of Children with Special Needs (CWSN). NEP 2020 prioritizes ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, have access to quality education through early identification, personalized learning paths, and the integration of assistive technologies.

Despite the progressive vision set out by NEP 2020, the actualization of inclusive education faces numerous challenges. These challenges range from inadequate infrastructure and teacher shortages to social stigma and financial constraints. Additionally, there is often a lack of understanding and training in inclusive pedagogies, which further complicates the process of educating CWSN in mainstream schools. At the same time, NEP 2020 provides several opportunities to address these barriers, particularly through the integration of technology, flexible curricula, and improved teacher training.

This paper aims to explore the challenges and opportunities presented by NEP 2020 in the context of inclusive education for CWSN. It will analyze the key provisions in NEP 2020 that pertain to inclusive education and examine how these can be effectively implemented to create an equitable education system. Moreover, the paper will highlight the gaps in current practices and offer recommendations for leveraging

the opportunities outlined in the policy to improve the educational experience for CWSN in India.

**Objectives of the study:**

To create awareness among the teachers' benefits of the NEP 2020 for the children with special need.

**Review of literature**

The concept of Inclusive Education has evolved globally, and in the Indian context, it has been significantly shaped by policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The NEP 2020 aims to provide equitable access to education for all students, including those with special needs. In this review, we explore the literature surrounding inclusive education in the context of NEP 2020, focusing on Children with Special Needs (CWSN).

Inclusive education is grounded in the social model of disability, which suggests that disabilities are primarily caused by societal barriers rather than the physical or mental impairments themselves. Researchers like Booth and Ainscow (2011) argue that inclusive education focuses on eliminating barriers to participation in education and promoting diversity. The NEP 2020 echoes this philosophy, advocating for inclusive practices that ensure no child is left behind due to physical, mental, or social disabilities.

According to UNESCO (2020), inclusive education should be built on three pillars: accessibility, acceptance, and adaptation. The literature emphasizes the importance of designing an education system that is flexible and adaptable to the needs of all students, particularly CWSN.

The NEP 2020, which replaced the National Policy on Education of 1986, prioritizes inclusive education, especially for marginalized groups, including CWSN. Scholars like Krishna Kumar (2020) highlight that the NEP emphasizes:

- The reduction of educational inequities through interventions and policies.
- The integration of special educators and the promotion of accessible learning materials.

- The focus on early identification of disabilities and individualized learning programs. These principles are seen as a step toward deconstructing the segregated education system and ensuring that all children can learn in general education settings.

A substantial body of literature underscores that the physical infrastructure in most Indian schools is not equipped for CWSN. Researchers like Rajeev & Ramesh (2019) argue that classroom accessibility, such as ramps, modified desks, and assistive technologies, is often inadequate, hindering the effective participation of CWSN. Schools in rural or economically disadvantaged areas are particularly affected by these deficiencies, leading to a lack of opportunities for inclusive education.

Numerous studies point out the gap in teacher preparation for handling children with special needs. Tiwari (2020) and Sharma & Bhardwaj (2018) have emphasized that teachers often lack adequate training in special education pedagogy, making them ill-equipped to support students with diverse learning needs. The NEP 2020 aims to address this issue by emphasizing the need for special education training and the professional development of teachers, but its effectiveness will depend on the extent to which these programs are implemented at the grassroots level.

Despite the policy's inclusive intentions, attitudinal barriers toward CWSN remain a significant challenge. Scholars such as Kohli & Singh (2021) suggest that negative attitudes and stereotypes about disabilities, both within the educational system and society at large, impede the full inclusion of CWSN. The social stigma surrounding disabilities often leads to discrimination, bullying, and exclusion, which severely affects the mental health and academic performance of these children.

The availability of specialized support services like counselors, special educators, and healthcare professionals is often limited. Studies by Patel (2020) point out that schools frequently lack the necessary human resources to cater to the specific needs of CWSN. While the NEP 2020 calls for

integrating special educators into general classrooms, the actual implementation of this recommendation has been slow due to shortages of trained personnel.

The NEP 2020 encourages the use of assistive technologies to ensure that CWSN have equal access to educational content. Literature reviews, such as those by Sundar (2020), indicate that assistive technology tools like screen readers, speech recognition software, and alternative communication devices have been transformative in enhancing the learning experience of CWSN. This has the potential to reduce barriers and create more personalized learning pathways for children with disabilities.

Inclusive education under the NEP 2020 aims to individualize education through flexible curriculum structures. Saxena (2021) highlights the potential for differentiated learning strategies, such as project-based learning and peer tutoring, which can better address the needs of CWSN. Personalized learning allows for modifications in curriculum content, teaching methods, and assessments, enabling a more inclusive and adaptive learning environment.

Literature also points to the value of collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and local communities. The NEP 2020 advocates for community participation in educational processes, which can lead to a more inclusive learning environment. Jain & Gupta (2022) argue that collaboration among stakeholders, including teachers, parents, social workers, and NGOs, can help create a strong support network for CWSN and improve their overall educational experience.

### **Key Provisions of NEP 2020 for Children with Special Needs (CWSN)**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to provide equitable, inclusive, and high-quality education for all children, including Children with Special Needs (CWSN). The policy acknowledges the diverse needs of learners and presents several provisions that aim to ensure that CWSN are integrated into the mainstream education system while receiving the support they require for holistic development. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) stress on a

strong foundation for children aged 3-8 years by ensuring quality education, nutrition, and overall well-being and on Foundational Stage”, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) focusing on play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based learning

Below are the key provisions in NEP 2020 that specifically address the needs of CWSN:

#### Early Identification and Intervention

One of the most significant provisions of NEP 2020 is the emphasis on early identification and intervention for children with disabilities or learning challenges. The policy advocates that schools identify children with special needs early on in their educational journey. Early identification helps mitigate the challenges that children with disabilities may face later in their academic journey.

The policy also calls for creating a supportive environment to detect and address developmental delays or disabilities as early as possible through regular screenings and collaboration with medical and educational professionals.

- Provision Highlight: “Early identification and intervention to address learning challenges” (NEP 2020, Section 4.6).

#### Flexible Curriculum and Pedagogy

NEP 2020 calls for a flexible curriculum and pedagogical framework that accommodates the needs of all students, including CWSN. The policy advocates for competency-based learning that emphasizes learning outcomes and individual development, rather than rigid academic benchmarks. This flexibility ensures that CWSN can learn at their own pace, using personalized learning approaches that cater to different abilities and learning styles.

The policy suggests that the curriculum should be designed with multiple entry points and exit points, and should be adapted to allow students with disabilities to access and engage with the content effectively.

- Provision Highlight: “A flexible curriculum that is inclusive of all learners and allows for multiple pathways of learning” (NEP 2020, Section 4.4).

#### Use of Technology and Assistive Devices

Another important provision of NEP 2020 is the promotion of assistive technologies and digital learning tools to support CWSN. The policy advocates for the integration of technology in classrooms, particularly for students with disabilities. The use of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, Braille e-books, audio tools, and sign language resources, can enhance the learning experience for CWSN and make education more accessible.

The policy also proposes the creation of a National Repository of Resources for Inclusive Education, which will provide digital content in multiple formats, ensuring accessibility for children with different types of disabilities.

- Provision Highlight: “Use of technology, including assistive devices and online learning platforms, to support diverse learning needs” (NEP 2020, Section 4.6).

#### Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teacher training and professional development under NEP 2020 are critical in transforming the education system into an inclusive one. By equipping teachers with the right skills, knowledge, and technology, the policy aims to bridge the gap between mainstream education and special education. NEP 2020 emphasizes the need for specialized teacher training and professional development in inclusive education. It proposes that all teachers, not just special educators, be trained in inclusive pedagogies, the use of assistive technology, and methods to address the needs of CWSN. The policy encourages the integration of inclusive education principles into pre-service teacher education and continuous in-service professional development programs.

By ensuring that teachers are well-equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge, NEP 2020 aims to create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment for CWSN.

- Provision Highlight: “Training of all teachers in inclusive practices and the use of assistive technologies” (NEP 2020, Section 5.9).

### Inclusive Assessment and Evaluation

NEP 2020 advocates for inclusive assessments that accommodate the diverse needs of CWSN. It emphasizes the importance of flexible assessment methods, such as extended time, use of scribes, alternative formats, and oral exams for students who require them. The goal is to ensure that CWSN are evaluated in a fair and equitable manner, based on their abilities, rather than being penalized due to their disabilities.

The policy also calls for the development of inclusive examination reforms at the national and state levels, to ensure that CWSN can participate in assessments in a manner that reflects their true capabilities.

- Provision Highlight: “Flexible, inclusive assessments that ensure fairness and accessibility for students with disabilities” (NEP 2020, Section 4.9).

### Resource Centers and Support Services

The policy calls for the establishment of resource centers in schools to support CWSN. These centers will provide access to specialized resources, assistive devices, and educational materials that are tailored to the needs of children with disabilities. Schools are also encouraged to integrate services such as speech therapy, counseling, and physical therapy, ensuring a holistic approach to the education and well-being of CWSN. The policy ensures that children with special needs receive quality education tailored to their abilities. With continuous implementation and community involvement, NEP 2020 aims to create a truly equitable education system where no child is left behind.

Additionally, NEP 2020 envisions a collaborative model, wherein special educators, psychologists, counselors, and parents work together to create a customized education plan for each CWSN.

- Provision Highlight: “Establishing resource centers and providing a holistic support system for CWSN” (NEP 2020, Section 4.6).

### Community and Parental Involvement

NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of community and parental involvement in creating an inclusive education environment for CWSN. The policy encourages active participation from parents and local communities in school governance and decision-making processes related to the inclusion of CWSN.

The policy suggests that school-level committees should include parents and community members to ensure that children with disabilities are included in all aspects of school life and are provided with the necessary support at home and in the community.

- Provision Highlight: “Encouraging active parental and community participation in the inclusion process” (NEP 2020, Section 4.6).

### Special Focus on Marginalized Groups

The NEP 2020 also recognizes the intersectionality of disability with other forms of marginalization, such as poverty, caste, and gender. The policy emphasizes that children with disabilities from marginalized backgrounds face compounded barriers to education and calls for targeted interventions to address these disparities.

Special measures are suggested to ensure that CWSN from marginalized groups receive not only the educational support they need but also benefits such as scholarships, assistive devices, and access to government welfare schemes.

- Provision Highlight: “Special focus on the education of marginalized CWSN, including those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds” (NEP 2020, Section 5.5).

### Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education for CWSN

Despite the promising provisions of NEP 2020, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of inclusive

education for CWSN:

**Lack of Infrastructure:** Many schools, particularly in rural and underserved areas, lack the infrastructure required to accommodate CWSN. This includes inaccessible school buildings, inadequate facilities (e.g., ramps, toilets, transportation), and the absence of specialized resources such as Braille books or sign language interpreters.

**Teacher Shortage and Lack of Special Education Training:** There is a significant shortage of trained special education teachers, and many general education teachers lack the expertise to work with CWSN. While NEP 2020 highlights the need for inclusive teaching practices, the reality is that many teachers are not equipped to cater to the diverse needs of CWSN.

**Financial Constraints:** Implementing inclusive education requires substantial investment in infrastructure, resources, and teacher training. With limited budgets and competing priorities, many state governments and schools struggle to allocate sufficient funds for inclusive education initiatives.

**Social Stigma and Discrimination:** Societal attitudes toward disability continue to be a significant barrier to inclusion. Stigma and discrimination toward CWSN are pervasive, and these negative attitudes often result in the marginalization of CWSN within mainstream schools. This can impact both their academic performance and their social integration.

**Policy Implementation Gaps:** While NEP 2020 outlines clear guidelines for inclusive education, its implementation at the grassroots level has been inconsistent. Lack of clear accountability mechanisms, monitoring, and support systems have led to gaps in the effective realization of inclusive education provisions in many regions.

**Assessment and Examination Barriers:** Although NEP 2020 advocates for inclusive assessments, there is still a lack of uniformity in the implementation of accessible evaluation systems. Many CWSN continue to face difficulties in taking exams due to rigid formats that do not accommodate their specific needs.

## **Opportunities in Inclusive Education under NEP 2020**

Despite the challenges, NEP 2020 provides several opportunities for enhancing inclusive education in India:

**Technological Advancements:** The integration of technology into education offers significant opportunities for CWSN. Online platforms, digital resources, and assistive technologies can enable personalized learning experiences, support different learning styles, and provide flexibility in instruction. Tools like screen readers, audio lessons, and interactive apps can help bridge the learning gap for CWSN.

**Multidisciplinary Approaches:** NEP 2020 encourages collaboration between educators, medical professionals, counsellors, and parents. This multidisciplinary approach ensures that CWSN receive comprehensive support, addressing both their educational and developmental needs. Collaborative efforts also contribute to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

**Flexible Curriculum and Pedagogy:** The focus on a flexible and learner-centric curriculum allows for personalized learning pathways for CWSN. Teachers can modify their teaching strategies to meet the specific needs of each student, making learning more inclusive.

**Government and Legislative Support:** The RPWD Act 2016 and NEP 2020 provide a strong legal and policy framework for inclusive education. This alignment between policies ensures that CWSN's rights are protected, and schools are mandated to provide equitable access to education.

**Community and Parental Involvement:** Engaging parents and local communities is critical in creating inclusive learning environments. NEP 2020 recognizes the importance of community participation in reducing stigma and promoting the inclusion of CWSN in mainstream education.

**Teacher Training and Professional Development:** NEP 2020's emphasis on teacher training offers a significant opportunity for educators to develop the necessary skills to teach CWSN effectively. With specialized training programs in inclusive education, teachers can become better equipped to support CWSN in the classroom.

### **Discussion: Key Findings**

The literature highlights both the persistent challenges and emerging opportunities in implementing inclusive education under NEP 2020.

#### **Challenges:**

The infrastructure gap remains a major issue, particularly in rural and low-resource schools, where many CWSN are unable to access education due to the lack of physical accommodations. While the policy advocates for inclusive classrooms, much of the infrastructure still needs substantial development. Similarly, the attitudinal barriers continue to be a significant obstacle. Teachers and peers often hold stereotypical views of disabilities, leading to the social exclusion of CWSN. Despite the NEP's focus on teacher training, actual training programs still fall short in many areas, leaving teachers unprepared to meet the diverse needs of CWSN.

#### **Opportunities:**

On the positive side, technology integration provides a significant opportunity for improving access to education for CWSN. With assistive technologies and digital learning tools, students with disabilities can better engage with the curriculum. Moreover, the flexible curriculum envisioned in NEP 2020 allows for the customization of learning experiences, which is critical for students with special needs. This approach can address the individual learning styles and paces of CWSN, offering a more personalized educational experience.

Additionally, the focus on mental health is an essential opportunity for enhancing the overall well-being of CWSN. Integrating psychologists and counselors into schools, as the policy suggests, can provide CWSN with the emotional and psychological support they need, ensuring they remain motivated and engaged in their learning.

#### **Results: Key Findings from Existing Studies**

Several studies have provided insights into the impact of NEP 2020 on inclusive education:

- **Infrastructure Deficiencies:** Studies by Rajeev & Ramesh (2019) indicate that, while policy provisions for infrastructure improvements are in place, implementation has been slow, particularly in rural areas.
- **Teacher Preparedness:** Sharma & Bhardwaj (2018) and Tiwari (2020) report that although NEP 2020 emphasizes teacher training, many teachers still lack specialized knowledge in inclusive education.
- **Technology Use:** Sundar (2020) found that assistive technology can improve learning outcomes for CWSN but emphasized the need for training teachers to effectively use such technologies.
- **Mental Health Support:** Patel (2020) and Mehta & Jain (2020) highlight the importance of integrating mental health services within schools to address the emotional needs of CWSN, contributing to better educational outcomes.

## Conclusion

The review of related literature and results indicates that while NEP 2020 offers significant opportunities for advancing inclusive education, its success largely depends on overcoming existing challenges. Key areas requiring attention include infrastructure development, teacher training, and the reduction of social stigma associated with disabilities. Technology integration, personalized learning, and mental health support present significant opportunities to improve educational outcomes for CWSN. As the policy continues to unfold, targeted efforts and collaborations among educational institutions, government bodies, and communities will be essential to achieving a truly inclusive education system for CWSN in India.

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