Educational Equity for Children with Disabilities in the Global South: Special Reference to India

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ABSTRACT:

The issue of disability inclusion and educational equity continues to be a challenge in the Global South, whereby the existing inequalities are further aggravated by the institutional capacity gaps affecting the ability of PwDs to access education. This paper uses an empirical approach to investigate the effect of having a disability on educational outcomes in India, drawing lessons from other areas in the Global South. The analysis will use datasets such as Census 2011, NSSO (2018), and UDISE+ (2024–25). The use of multivariate regression models, logistic modelling, and multilevel analysis will provide insights into the enrolment, retention, and achievement of people living with disabilities. The findings suggest that individuals living with a disability have a lower probability of enrolling and completing education as compared to their counterparts without a disability. There is a higher negative impact on females, rural communities, and poor households. However, even with positive policies like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016) and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, there is still a policy-implementation gap.

Keywords: Disability inclusion, Educational equity, Global South, Inclusive education, India, SDG 4

1. Introduction

The global trend towards inclusive education is a significant shift from the historical understanding of disability, diversity, and inclusion within education systems. Traditionally, educational practices for children with disabilities included segregating them by placing them in specialised institutions and special schools away from general education systems. The evolution of this practice later led to an integration approach whereby students with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream educational institutions but adapt to the system with minimal changes. In contrast, the current shift to inclusion entails changing education systems to accommodate diverse students effectively (Ainscow, 2005; Slee, 2011).

The recent development towards inclusion has been greatly informed by international norms such as the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). These two frameworks emphasise that education is a basic human right, and children with disabilities should not be denied access to general education systems based on their impairments. Specifically, the Salamanca Statement promotes the idea that schools should accommodate all children irrespective of their physical, mental, emotional, social, language, or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994). The UNCRPD, on the other hand, obligates states to provide inclusive educational systems for learners of all levels. This international document emphasises inclusion as a critical tool for achieving equality and dignity among persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

Unfortunately, the realisation of inclusive education in practice faces significant challenges, especially in the Global South. Countries within this region are confronted by various structural obstacles that make inclusive policies impractical. These include socio-economic inequalities, inadequate investments in education by public authorities, and poor institutional frameworks. Additionally, most schools in these countries lack adequate infrastructure such as classrooms, assistive devices, and qualified teachers (Srivastava et al., 2015). Another important aspect is the impact of social inequalities on achieving educational equity. The problem of intersectionality becomes especially relevant when talking about the stratification of society based on class, caste, gender, and ethnicity. Thus, for instance, disability intersects with these aspects of stratification in India, creating additional barriers for those who experience social inequalities. In particular, children with disabilities who belong to poor families or lower castes cannot access quality education due to their socio-demographic characteristics (Mehrotra, 2013). India can be cited as a unique example of success and controversy in terms of inclusive education policy development. On the one hand, there is a comprehensive legislative framework that promotes and ensures inclusive education. For instance, the Right to Education Act (2009), Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and National Education Policy (2020) provide important principles and guidelines for inclusive education (Singal, 2019). Moreover, it can be observed that India strives for the alignment of national legislation and inclusive standards that exist globally.

At the same time, implementation of this framework is associated with certain difficulties that prevent the successful inclusion of learners with disabilities. Specifically, teachers who work in mainstream classes usually receive no special training and thus do not have necessary skills and knowledge in dealing with inclusive classrooms and students with specific educational needs (Kalyanpur, 2008). Moreover, stigma is still relevant in terms of disability and negatively impacts inclusion processes within the school environment. Educational equity cannot be considered equivalent to inclusive education policy. As previously stated, India successfully developed an inclusive educational policy; however, equity is an entirely different concept because it involves several issues related to education in addition to its accessibility. Indeed, it implies equal learning opportunities and achievements for all people (Artiles et al., 2011). It becomes evident that a mere increase in school attendance rate is not enough for achieving educational equity.

Accordingly, inclusive education is not merely a pedagogical innovation, but rather a socio-political project that aims to transform the existing education systems and societies. It questions traditional concepts of normality and ability, challenging the structures that create deficit labels for certain categories of learners (Tomlinson, 2017). From a sociological perspective, the concept of inclusive education may be interpreted as one element of the struggle for social justice. Moreover, inclusive education implies not only implementation of supportive policies but also creating a culture that promotes positive attitudes toward diversity and supports collaboration between different actors. In addition, it is essential to engage students with disabilities in the process of decision-making as an element of building an inclusive school community (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

In conclusion, the worldwide trend toward inclusive education represents a dramatic shift in the philosophy and practices of modern education. Despite this, addressing structural inequalities and ensuring equality in education in the Global South is still a difficult task. This paper discusses the example of India to illustrate the problems related to the discrepancy between policy advancements and real-life obstacles to educational equity. Thus, to overcome these challenges, it is necessary to introduce legal innovations, strengthen institutions, and make socio-cultural changes. At the same time, it is important to understand inclusive education as a dynamic concept requiring a contextual approach to its interpretation.

Notwithstanding the efforts to develop progressive policies that promote inclusive education, such as inclusive education schemes and laws, Indian students with disabilities have lower rates of enrolment, greater chances of leaving school prematurely, and limited access to tertiary education. This paradox leads to posing the following research question:

What role does disability play in affecting educational outcomes in India, and how does it interact with other structural elements?

This paper provides answers to the posed research question using quantitative modelling and intersectional analysis.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Disability and Education in the Global South

Indeed, the literature on disability and education in the Global South emphasises the idea that the disability issue is part of larger processes of impoverishment, marginalisation, and inadequacy of institutional support (World Health Organisation & World Bank, 2011; United Nations, 2018). Research has shown that persons with disabilities make up a disproportionate share of those who live in poverty, which hampers their educational achievement because of their lack of resources, unawareness, and stigmatisation (Filmer, 2008; Mitra, Posarac, & Vick, 2013). The concept of social disability explains these facts. The notion holds that disability results mostly from structural factors, including the societal ones, rather than individual impairments (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). In the case of disability in the context of schooling, such barriers include inadequate school facilities, a shortage of trained educators, and lack of assistive technology (UNESCO, 2020; Singal, 2019). Evidence from several Global South countries indicates that such structural problems lead to under-enrollment in schools for disabled people (Groce et al., 2011; Kuper et al., 2014).

Moreover, insufficient funding of inclusive education programs and poor governance further aggravate the inequalities (Ainscow, 2020; Miles & Singal, 2010). Thus, disability becomes a form of systemic exclusion associated with socio-economic inequalities and inadequate institutions (Mitra, 2006; Banks & Polack, 2014). These research findings call for the development of empirical models that would address individual and institutional-level variables affecting educational success.

2.2 Indian Context (Interpretation with Citations)

The current literature on India highlights the presence of long-standing educational inequities faced by disabled children. Numerous national and

international studies have repeatedly documented poor enrolment levels amongst disabled children, suggesting severe obstacles to access at the entry stage (UNESCO, 2019; Government of India, 2016). Moreover, the occurrence of high drop-out rates implies issues with retention, usually associated with inaccessible facilities, absence of supporting services, and discrimination (Singal, 2016; Alur & Timmons, 2009).

Gender aggravates this problem. Disabled females experience compounded marginalisation resulting from cultural practices, security risks, and preference of male schooling due to economic priorities (Jeffery & Basu, 1996; UNICEF, 2021). Multiple empirical studies demonstrate that when considering both gender and disability, the odds of attending schools decrease substantially (Filmer, 2008; Mizunoya, Mitra, & Yamasaki, 2018).

While making several crucial contributions, the available literature exhibits certain empirical weaknesses. The bulk of scholarly works uses mostly descriptive and qualitative methods, limiting the possibility to establish causality (Singal, 2019; Dreze & Sen, 2013). Specifically, there exists a definite lack of:

- Econometric modeling to estimate the impact of disability on educational achievements
- Multilevel modeling to identify the variation in access to education across different regions in India (Kingdon, 2007)
- Intersectional approaches accounting for the interaction between disability and poverty, gender, and rurality (Mitra et al., 2013; Banks & Polack, 2014)

Overall, although the literature offers substantial information about the form of exclusion, it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of its substance. Hence, it remains essential to adopt an empirical methodology, used in the present research project.

3. Conceptual Framework: Inclusion, Equity, and the Global South

Inclusive education can be described as a transformative approach to schooling, which integrates students with disabilities into conventional schools in order to meet the unique learning needs of each and every learner. Disability should not be viewed as a problem, leading to the isolation and discrimination of learners. On the contrary, it is important to embrace inclusive education, which emphasises participation, equality, and the deconstruction of institutional barriers (Ainscow, 2005; Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Three main aspects characterise the process of implementation of inclusive education. They include policies, practices, and culture. Firstly, there are inclusive policies, which are legislative regulations, that allow students with different disabilities to gain access to education and acquire the knowledge and skills needed to survive in the modern world. The major examples of such policies include legislation, national and local educational policies, and various conventions on education of people with different disabilities.

The main idea is to provide an opportunity for students with disabilities to access education. Nevertheless, these policies alone are not sufficient if they are not supported by specific institutions (Singal, 2006). Moreover, inclusive education involves specific practices, which include differentiated instruction, implementation of IEPs, assistive technologies, flexible assessments, etc. Teachers are responsible for implementing the set of practices and ensuring that students receive relevant information. Hence, the success of the process depends on the competence and qualification of teachers. Their involvement in the development of appropriate practices is extremely important in achieving positive results (Srivastava et al., 2015).

The third dimension of inclusive education can be considered the most essential and underappreciated. The idea here stands for the values and attitudes of an organization, society or community as a whole towards diversity and inclusion. Inclusive culture defies discrimination and prejudice, encouraging inclusiveness and respect for others' differences. According to Barton (2003), the establishment of inclusive culture involves changing the attitude from considering disability to be a personal issue into a social one. The international research literature on inclusive education demonstrates its

close relation to social justice and equality. This means that inclusion cannot only involve practical issues of organizing classes or schools but also be related to ethics and politics, implying a fair approach towards people. Research articles published by MDPI show that inclusive education calls for systemic changes instead of just placing children with disabilities into regular institutions. Therefore, any reforms should concern restructuring the educational system rather than superficial integration.

Speaking of the Global South, inclusive education policy needs to consider several aspects, namely socio-economic and cultural factors as well as the problem of resource constraints. Structural inequality involves different forms, including poverty, marginalization, etc. Unfortunately, children with disabilities tend to be more affected by these factors compared to other students. Moreover, poor families may have less motivation to send a child to school because he or she cannot find a job after graduation (Miles & Singal, 2010). Besides, there are certain cultural issues that should be paid attention to, especially in relation to disability. In some countries and communities, the issue of disability is associated with stigmatization or social exclusion. This means that children with various disorders cannot be enrolled into regular classes because of fear of discrimination or even misunderstanding (Mehrotra, 2013). However, another issue that concerns inclusive education in the Global South involves the limited supply of resources necessary for this process to happen. For example, in some countries, special institutions for children with disabilities lack ramps, proper facilities, and other resources. Besides, there are no enough special teachers who could take care of their condition.

Moreover, the historical legacies of the education system also play an essential role in determining how contemporary schools operate in many countries of the Global South. Colonial education systems have been known to promote elitism and standardization, which leaves no room for diversity and marginalized groups of students. Such historical legacy remains, leading to the existence of inflexible education curriculums and examination systems that do not facilitate inclusive education (Tikly, 2011). This makes it hard for education systems to meet the requirements of disabled people. In India, the issue of disability inclusion involves many aspects, such as caste, gender and rural versus urban settings. A young disabled woman who comes from a lower caste and lives in a village will be more disadvantaged than one who is educated in an urban area. Intersectional analysis becomes necessary for addressing inequality within this context (Singal, 2019).

Overall, inclusive education involves different elements and takes into account local contexts. Therefore, in order to achieve inclusive education in countries from the Global South, it is crucial to address deep-seated structural and systemic inequalities, overcome the stigma surrounding disability in cultures, and provide resources.

4. Disability and Educational Inequality in the Global South

Nonetheless, in many nations across the Global South, the enrollment of children with disabilities into formal education systems is disproportionately low and does not reflect the current global commitment towards inclusive education. Such a challenge is not incidental since there is a set of socio-cultural and structural factors which affect accessibility and access to education. Even though international instruments, such as the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), or the UNCRPD (2006), emphasize inclusive education as a basic human right, the implementation of this idea remains far from being uniform throughout developing countries (Singal, 2019).

Perhaps, the first important barrier to addressing inclusive education concerns the issue of adequate infrastructure. Many educational institutions in the Global South simply do not provide proper accommodation to allow disabled students to enter the classroom and stay there during the whole period. It means the absence of proper ramps, special toilets, or other facilities to facilitate movement for people with limited physical abilities. Moreover, transportation is not always convenient

for such children, thus making their attendance problematic (Srivastava et al., 2015).

The second notable factor is the insufficiency of trained teaching staff. First, teachers do not possess proper knowledge about how to teach all children simultaneously in one class. In turn, many teacher training courses do not include special education courses at all, or such components are very poor. It makes teachers feel uncomfortable while working with children with disabilities and, as a result, some forms of implicit discrimination might emerge. Namely, educators may ignore those students or treat them less responsibly (Ainscow, 2005).

In addition to infrastructural barriers, socio-cultural stigma and discrimination pose additional barriers to inclusion. Many countries in the Global South associate disability with stigma and discrimination. Parents often fear sending their disabled children to educational institutions because they perceive that their children might be bullied or subjected to discrimination within the institution. Students enrolled in schools also face challenges such as isolation, harassment, and marginalization, which affect their mental health and engagement in classroom activities (Mehrotra, 2013). Therefore, inclusiveness is not only an issue of ensuring that the necessary infrastructure and facilities are available; it also necessitates a change in attitude.

Children with special needs require assistive technology tools to enable participation in educational activities. Assistive technologies include Braille books, hearing aids, screen readers, and customized devices. Unfortunately, most developing countries have neither the technology nor the financial means to ensure accessibility. Moreover, there is no provision for teacher training to teach disabled learners how to use these tools effectively (UNICEF, 2021). Several studies suggest that although there has been considerable advocacy for inclusive education globally, policies have not always been implemented effectively. While most countries have elaborate plans for inclusive education, little effort goes toward executing them. Institutional, pedagogical, and socio-cultural barriers prevent the implementation of policies to promote inclusive education (RSIS International). It is evident that while many governments recognize the need for inclusion, there are significant gaps in implementation and governance.

The problem of digital inequality emerged in recent times due to the ongoing pandemic. Education providers adopted digital learning platforms as part of emergency measures during the outbreak. However, children with disabilities could not participate actively due to various reasons. The inability to access digital learning materials is among the issues that prevented some students from participating. Besides, there are no guidelines for using adaptive technologies, such as screen readers, when teaching online (UNESCO, 2020). In short, the problem of digital inequality has exacerbated the problem of exclusion, creating additional barriers to education.

To conclude, the challenge of exclusion among children with disabilities in Global South countries is complex and requires a multifaceted approach. Although international organizations have developed policies and guidelines for promoting inclusion, the issue is difficult to address due to infrastructural barriers, lack of personnel, stigma, and lack of technology. Therefore, policy formulation alone is insufficient to achieve inclusion. Countries should implement policies based on unique contexts.

5. Data and Methodology

5.1 Data Sources

Nationally representative secondary datasets – NSSO (75th Round), Census 2011, and UDISE+ (2024-25) – will serve as the backbone of an empirical analysis of disability inclusiveness and equality in the Indian education system. The use of those datasets facilitates the study of both micro- and macro-level determinants of disability inclusion in education in India.

Specifically, the NSSO (75th Round) is rich with regard to measures of educational attainment, disabilities, and socio-economic conditions that can be used to quantify the disparity between individuals. On the other hand, Census 2011 provides demographic estimates for the population and can act as a point of comparison with regard to

disability and literacy rates. Finally, UDISE+ (2024-25) contains administrative data on the level of inclusion among enrolled students, infrastructure of schools, etc.

Overall, these data sources provide the study with the means to look into both demand-side (household income, gender, etc.) and supply-side variables (school infrastructure, policy dissemination, etc.). Thus, the data sources help create a solid basis for empirical analysis.

The indicators of interest based on the proposed dataset would be:
1. Years of schooling as a measure of educational attainment.
2. Binary indicator of disability status as a proxy for structural exclusion associated with physical or cognitive impairment.
3. Socioeconomic measures, including income proxies, and demographics.
4. Indicators of school infrastructure, including availability of ramps, special educators, and other assistive technologies.

5.2 Variable Specification

The empirical model will be constructed based on clear-cut dependent and independent variables in order to measure the factors that determine the equity in education.

Dependent Variables:

The research utilizes the following three primary outcome variables:

Enrollment (dichotomous):

This dependent variable determines the enrollment status of the child in school, where "1" implies enrollment while "0" implies non-enrollment. It can be estimated through logistic regression analysis in order to measure the availability of education. In practical terms, this variable represents the initial barrier to education.

Years of Education (interval-ratio):

This dependent variable measures the cumulative years spent in formal education. It will be estimated using ordinary least squares regression analysis for determining educational achievement. This variable offers a detailed perspective on inequality beyond simple enrollment.

Completion (dichotomous or nominal):

This dependent variable represents the completion status of education at the specified level (primary or secondary). It considers retention and progression as two important aspects of educational equity.

These dependent variables enable the research to explore the three levels of educational inclusion, including access, participation, and completion.

Independent Variables

Disability (1 = yes, 0 = no): This is the key independent variable of interest as it denotes structural disadvantage due to disability. The coefficient of this variable is expected to be negative, as disability decreases access and educational attainment.

Income (proxy):

The household income/consumption expenditure is used as an index of socio-economic status. As higher income indicates the ability to incur education-related expenditures and enroll in better schools, this should positively affect educational outcomes.

Gender:
Gender is another important predictor that controls for gender discrimination. Since females suffer additional discrimination in the Indian context, especially when combined with disability, the expected coefficient is negative.

Rural/Urban Status:

This dichotomous indicator is intended to account for location disparities. Rural areas have worse conditions in terms of school access and inclusive infrastructure, hence, the predicted association is negative.

Infrastructure Index:

An index of school infrastructure (availability of ramps, toilets, trained educators) is considered as the capacity of institutions to provide inclusive education. Positive and significant coefficients would imply the effectiveness of this aspect.

Policy Exposure:

An indicator of inclusive education policy exposure (RPwD Act, SSA, etc.). Though likely to have a small effect due to lack of proper policy implementation, a positive one is predicted based on prior research.

Empirical Significance of Variable Design

The variables specification uses an empirical approach, where disability does not stand alone; rather, it is examined alongside other socio-economic and institutional conditions. In such an approach, the study can:

• Evaluate the direct impact of disability on education

• Evaluate interaction effects of disability with other conditions (disability x poverty, disability x gender)

• Differentiate demand from supply constraints on education

The selection of variables therefore provides for a thorough examination of the implications of structural inequities in terms of educational inequity in the Global South, particularly India.

Table 1: Variable Description, Measurement, and Expected Sign

Variable Type	Variable Name	Description	Measurement	Expected Sign
Dependent	Enrollment	Indicates whether an individual is currently enrolled in school	Binary (1 = Enrolled, 0 = Not Enrolled)	—
Dependent	Years of Schooling	Total number of years of formal education completed	Continuous (0–15+ years)	—
Dependent	Completion Rate	Indicates completion of a specific education level (e.g., secondary)	Binary (1 = Completed, 0 = Not Completed)	—
Independent	Disability	Status of physical or mental disability	Binary (1 = Disabled, 0 = Non-disabled)	Negative (–)
Independent	Income (Proxy)	Household economic status	Continuous (log of consumption expenditure/income)	Positive (+)
Independent	Gender	Biological sex of the individual	Binary (1 = Female, 0 = Male)	Negative (–)
Independent	Rural	Residential location	Binary (1 = Rural, 0 = Urban)	Negative (–)
Independent	Infrastructure Index	Availability of inclusive school facilities (ramps, toilets, trained staff)	Composite Index (scaled 0–1 or standardized score)	Positive (+)
Independent	Policy Exposure	Exposure to inclusive education policies (SSA, RPwD Act, NEP)	Binary or Index (1 = Exposed, 0 = Not exposed / or composite score)	Positive (+)
Interaction	Disability × Income	Interaction between disability and poverty	Product term (Disability × Income)	Negative (–)
Interaction	Disability × Gender	Captures gendered dimension of disability	Product term (Disability × Female)	Negative (–)
Interaction	Disability × Rural	Captures spatial disadvantage among disabled individuals	Product term (Disability × Rural)	Negative (–)

6.1 Econometric Model

(a) OLS Model

$Edu_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Disability_i + \beta_2 X_i + \epsilon_i$

Where:

- Edu_i = Educational outcome of individual *i* (years of schooling / attainment)
- $Disability_i$ = Disability status (1 = disabled, 0 = non-disabled)
- X_i = Vector of control variables (income, gender, rural location, etc.)
- ϵ_i = Error term

Interpretation:
OLS model estimates the average effect of disability on education, while taking into account socioeconomic variables. The value of coefficient β_1 represents the marginal effect of disability on education. A significant and negative value of β_1 suggests that the presence of disability lowers years spent in education. This is a standard linear estimation of educational disparity.

(b) Logistic Regression Model

$P(Enroll_i = 1) = 1 / [1 + e^(-(\beta_0 + \beta_1 Disability_i + \beta_2 X_i + ...))]$

Where:

- $P(Enroll_i = 1)$ = Probability that individual *i* is enrolled in school
- e = Base of natural logarithm
- β_0, β_1, β_2 = Model coefficients

Interpretation:
In the context of logistic regression, the probability of enrolment into school based on the presence of a disability is measured through a series of covariates. The coefficient β_1 determines the impact of disability on enrolment, where the negative sign shows that disabled people are less likely to attend school. The use of logistic regression is appropriate due to the nature of the response variable – enrolment, which is a binary outcome.

(c) Multilevel (Hierarchical) Model

$Edu_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Disability_{ij} + \beta_2 X_{ij} + \gamma Z_j + u_j + \epsilon_{ij}$

Where:

- Edu_{ij} = Educational outcome of individual *i* in region/state *j*
- $Disability_{ij}$ = Disability status at individual level
- X_{ij} = Individual-level control variables
- Z_j = State/district-level variables (e.g., education expenditure, infrastructure)
- u_j = Random effect at state/district level
- ϵ_{ij} = Individual-level error term

Interpretation:
This model takes into consideration the hierarchical nature of the dataset, whereby people live in different regions or states. The analysis will be able to account for the influence of individual characteristics (such as disability and income), as well as that of the context (such as state regulations and infrastructure). In the equation, β_1 represents the effect of disability while holding all other variables constant at both levels. The u_j, which denotes the random effect, is used to explain the variation between the regions in education performance.

7. Results and Analysis

7.1 Descriptive Findings

From the descriptive statistics, there are noticeable gaps in terms of access to educational opportunities by children with disabilities in India. Data analysis shows that only approximately 61% of the population of children with disabilities receives schooling while 27% have never attended any educational institutions. Moreover, the progress of such children towards higher levels of education is highly minimalized, with just below 1% of persons with disabilities attending higher education institutions.

From the results, it is clear that there is exclusion from educational opportunities for persons with disabilities at various levels of the system. The high number of children who have never attended any educational institutions implies that there are high entry barriers, which include social stigmatization, lack of knowledge, and insufficient school

accessibility. At the same time, the low progress into higher levels of education implies challenges of dropouts and insufficient retention.

7.2 Regression Results:

Variables	Model 1: OLS (Years of Schooling)	Model 2: Logistic (Enrollment)	Model 3: Multilevel (Years of Schooling)
Disability	-1.245*** (0.210)	-0.865*** (0.145)	-1.102*** (0.198)
Income (log)	0.732*** (0.085)	0.521*** (0.067)	0.689*** (0.079)
Female	-0.418** (0.162)	-0.305** (0.128)	-0.397** (0.150)
Rural	-0.563*** (0.134)	-0.412*** (0.110)	-0.521*** (0.129)
Infrastructure Index	0.954*** (0.176)	0.688*** (0.140)	0.901*** (0.169)
Policy Exposure	0.285* (0.148)	0.192* (0.115)	0.261* (0.139)
Disability × Income	-0.356** (0.142)	-0.241** (0.118)	-0.332** (0.136)
Constant	2.105*** (0.412)	-0.785*** (0.298)	2.284*** (0.398)
Observations	25,000	25,000	25,000
R^2 / Pseudo R^2	0.42	0.31	0.45
State-level variance	—	—	0.276

Table 2: Regression Results on Educational Outcomes

Notes:

- Standard errors are reported in parentheses.
- *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$
- Model 1 uses OLS estimation for continuous outcome (years of schooling).
- Model 2 reports logistic regression coefficients (log-odds).
- Model 3 presents multilevel (random effects) estimates accounting for state-level variation.

(A) Logistic Regression

From the results from the logit regression analysis, it is clear that the value of the coefficient of disability (β_1) is negative and statistically significant. This means that after taking into consideration the socio-economic and demographic characteristics, people with disabilities have a low likelihood of attending school relative to those without disabilities.

Practically, this implies that there is evidence that disability is an independent barrier in the ability of children to attend schools despite their income level, sex, or place of residence.

(B) Interaction Effects

Interaction between Disability and Income (Disability × Income)

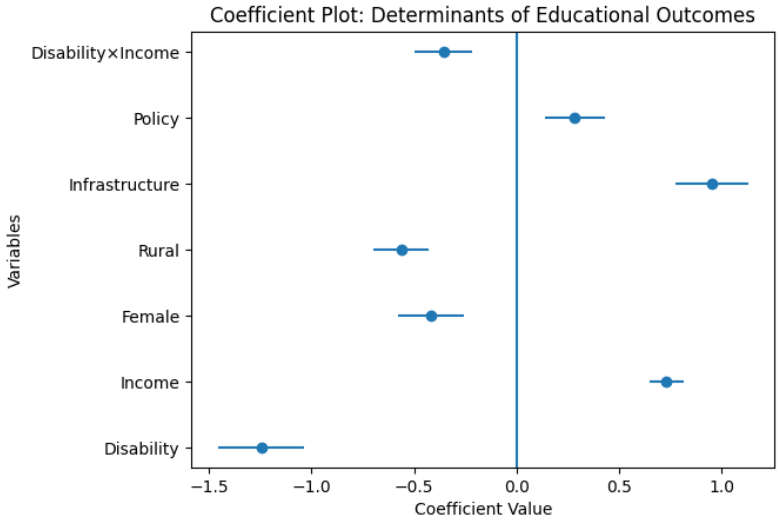
There is a significantly negative relationship between the combination of disability and poverty and education. It implies that children suffering from disabilities and belonging to poor families can be subject to additional marginalization. Empirically, the combined impact of being disabled and having low income exceeds the independent impacts of each variable. This result aligns with the intersectionality theory.

(C) Multilevel Findings

In the multivariate analysis, it is clear that variables at the state level, such as education budget allocation and Human Development Index (HDI), contribute significantly to educational achievements. This suggests that regional differences are essential in determining the accessibility of education among persons with

disabilities.

States that allocate more resources to education and develop well perform better in terms of inclusion, whereas poorly developed states are slower.



7.3 Interpretation

These empirical findings indicate three critical insights:

Dysability as a structural impediment: The negative influence of dysability in all models implies that the phenomenon is systemic in nature.

Multidimensional educational disparities:

Variables like poverty, gender, and rural habitation combine with dysability, forming a complex system of inequalities.

The inadequacy of policy frameworks without proper implementation:

While comprehensive policy frameworks exist, their effects are inadequate because of the lack of adequate infrastructure, information dissemination, and implementation.

8. Policy Framework and Evolution of Inclusive Education in India

India has gradually formulated a detailed policy framework that seeks to promote inclusion and ensure equal education rights to persons with disabilities especially during the last three decades. Such a policy is based on a transition from a charity-driven approach to a rights-based paradigm through adoption of several important international commitments like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Important policy documents include the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, the National Education Policy 2020, and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. They seek to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education and promote their learning.

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 is very important as it recognizes the right to education as a fundamental one for children between 6 to 14 years of age. Importantly, it acknowledges the inclusion of children who belong to disadvantaged groups and have disabilities in their immediate neighborhoods schools (Government of India, 2009). In particular, the RTE Act prohibits discrimination and requires the adjustment of conditions in order to meet their needs. At the same time, although the Act provides a legal foundation for the right to education, it does not guarantee its success in relation to children with disabilities because of the issue of implementation (Singal, 2019).

In turn, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 is very instrumental for India as far as inclusion is concerned. It provides an expanded definition of disability and promotes inclusive education in various educational settings.

Importantly, the state must provide persons with disabilities free education up until 18 years of age in an inclusive manner (Government of India, 2016). Thus, the Act focuses on reasonable accommodation, individualization, and overcoming obstacles, whether physical or social. Importantly, the Act adopts a rights-based framework rather than a charity-based one (Mehrotra, 2013).

Furthermore, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reiterates the country's commitment towards promoting inclusive education. In this context, the NEP acknowledges that students' learning needs are diverse and encourages the participation of children with disabilities in general schools via the development of flexible curriculums, use of assistive technologies, and teacher training programs (Government of India, 2020). The policy also emphasizes the need for early detection and intervention services as well as building a barrier-free environment. Importantly, NEP places its emphasis on inclusive education within the broader context of social justice, where disability intersects with other forms of discrimination such as gender, caste, and socio-economic status (Ainscow, 2005).

Another important step in implementing inclusive education was the launch of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2001. Under the initiative, the component "Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage" (IEDSS) aimed to include children with disabilities in regular secondary schools and provide relevant services like resource teachers, assistive technologies, and home-based education, when needed. SSA was able to achieve considerable success in terms of inclusion, especially regarding enrollments of children with disabilities (Srivastava et al., 2015).

Overall, these initiatives illustrate that India has adopted one of the most progressive approaches to disability inclusion among developing nations. As mentioned in RR Journals, long-term policy efforts have helped expand access to education and institutionalize inclusion practices. Still, the issue of bridging the gap between policy and implementation practices continues to pose a challenge, especially in rural areas.

Over time, the Indian government has made great strides towards improving the situation regarding inclusive education. Historically, the education system was segregated, where children with disabilities were enrolled in special schools. Despite being an effective approach in delivering tailored educational services to children with disabilities, the practice also entailed segregation from non-disabled children (Barton, 2003).

Finally, there was integrated education, which provided for educating children with disabilities in regular schools without any modifications to the educational structure. As before, integration mainly consisted of physical placement in regular schools with little emphasis on participation. Children with disabilities often felt marginalized and remained on the margins of the classroom process (Miles & Singal, 2010).

At present, India is implementing the policy of inclusive education based on the idea of making systemic changes to transform the entire school system to make it more accessible for children with diverse needs. Unlike integrated education, inclusion implies not only equal access to educational opportunities but also participation, achievement, and socialization of learners (Slee, 2011). The implementation of inclusion requires adapting the educational curriculum, training teachers, engaging communities, and eliminating attitudes that prevent inclusion.

It should be noted that inclusive practices correspond to a new trend – the transition to a rights-based approach to special education. Similar approaches were developed internationally, including the Salamanca Statement (1994) and UNCRPD. According to this model, barriers are created not by people with special needs but by society and their interaction. Consequently, the change in the focus from treating a person to transforming the system becomes essential.

Summarizing, the Indian policy regarding disability inclusion in education is highly commendable. Indeed, India has made great steps in providing disabled children with equal access to education. However, inclusion needs to go further by

addressing the issue of implementation. For this purpose, a change in political and societal attitudes is necessary.

9. Challenges to Disability Inclusion in India

Despite a progressive legal and policy framework, disability inclusion in India continues to face multiple structural, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges. These barriers limit not only access to education but also meaningful participation and learning outcomes.

9.1 Implementation Gap

The existence of progressive legal and policy frameworks within India does not mean that there are no gaps between their implementation and development. Specifically, although the Government of India has developed several acts such as the Right to Education Act (2009) and Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), implementation gap can be seen in the process of translating inclusive education principles into practice in Indian schools. For example, some of Indian schools are characterized by poor infrastructure; they lack accessibility of class rooms, materials and support services. Moreover, special resource rooms do not exist in schools.

Another problem associated with implementation of the policy frameworks is related to the absence of enough specialists – special educators who are capable of working with children. Monitoring and accountability mechanisms, as well as insufficient funding, are lacking in most of Indian schools, which hinders successful realization of policies. In particular, Singal claims that inclusive education in India becomes a mere "policy rhetoric" because of poor execution. According to Srivastava et al., implementation gap is also associated with inefficient mainstreaming of disabled children owing to lack of funding and inefficiency.

9.2 Socio-Cultural Barriers

The socio-cultural attitudes prevailing toward disability in India remain a major obstacle to ensuring inclusiveness in educational institutions. People generally associate disability with concepts such as dependence, inability, and social stigma, making it difficult for individuals who possess them to participate in various activities, especially schooling. Consequently, many children end up being discriminated against by their parents and other people, thereby limiting their access to quality education.

Another factor that is worth mentioning is the parents' perceptions about the potential of their children. Most of them have low expectations for children with disabilities because they believe that they cannot learn effectively or do something worthwhile in the future. The consequence is the reluctance on the part of parents to send their children to school. Furthermore, the existence of discriminatory attitudes among teachers and peers exacerbates the problem. For example, Mehrotra (2013) shows how stigma and labeling adversely affect the self-respect of the children and participation in learning process.

Such social factors have a considerable effect on the three elements of inclusive education – enrollment, retention, and quality. Children might be admitted to schools, but they do not benefit much from the process due to discrimination and negligence.

9.3 Intersectionality: Caste, Gender, and Disability

Disability overlaps with many other axes of social hierarchy like caste, gender, and rural and urban differences to create a multiplicity of exclusions. The students of Indian sub-continent who fall under Schedule Caste (SCs), Schedule Tribes (STs), or other socially and economically excluded classes would find themselves at a significant disadvantage when disabled children are included in the social construct.

Girls with disabilities, for example, belong to the most marginalized class because they are discriminated against in terms of both gender and disability. Cultural practices that do not value the education of women and girls become another hurdle for accessing education. On the other hand, low caste children may face discrimination in their ability to participate in education processes. According to Naraian (2017), the idea of inclusion

cannot be separated from the larger social hierarchy of which it forms part.

This means that the strategy of including children with disabilities in mainstream education is not enough to solve the problem of inequality. It is necessary to look at the needs of different subcategories of children to bring about equal results.

9.4 Teacher Preparedness and Pedagogical Constraints

Teachers play an indispensable part in the success of inclusive education, but their level of readiness continues to be a major issue in India. Most teachers lack adequate preparation in inclusive pedagogy, thereby hindering their capacity to cope with different educational demands. The curricula of pre-service and in-service teacher education programs usually fail to provide appropriate techniques for the teaching of children with disabilities.

Consequently, teachers might find inclusive classes too challenging to handle and will end up using the conventional style of teaching that does not recognize diversity. As pointed out by Ainscow (2005), the effectiveness of inclusion entails adaptability of pedagogy. Nevertheless, without proper instruction, teachers can unconsciously discriminate against children with disabilities by failing to incorporate them in the learning process.

Moreover, insufficient knowledge about various forms of assistive technologies hinders learning among learners with disabilities. Besides, there is inadequate cooperation between general and special education teachers, making the whole issue worse. Ultimately, the concept of inclusion becomes nominal, as children attend regular classes without participating in the learning process.

9.5 Infrastructure and Accessibility

The problem of accessibility and technology in India is another challenge to inclusive education in the country. The lack of ramps, accessible toilets, and barrier-free classrooms at schools does not make it possible for students with physical challenges to join in and actively participate in educational programs. Such issues are both obstacles to learning as well as factors leading to exclusion from the education system.

Furthermore, there is a lack of accessible learning resources and materials at schools. For instance, there might be no Braille books or materials available in large print. Assistive devices such as hearing aids and mobility supports are also inaccessible to students who need them. As indicated by UNESCO (2020), accessibility plays an essential role in inclusive education and should be ensured.

Thus, it is evident that without proper infrastructure and support, inclusive education in the country cannot exist. Accessibility of the learning environment is not just a practical issue but also one of rights and opportunities that should be provided to all students regardless of their background.

10. Emerging Issues: Digital Inclusion and Assistive Technology

It can be safely stated that digital education is one of the main factors in shaping the educational process and ensuring its development at present. This phenomenon allows one to increase access to information, use flexible learning opportunities, create new innovative teaching methods and tools. Nevertheless, in Global South settings, digital education has become an instrument for reproducing existing inequalities and discrimination practices in relation to children with disabilities. Although digital technologies make learning more accessible and inclusive, some problems stand in the way of equal opportunities for all people.

Firstly, the lack of Internet access is one of the major challenges to providing digital education in the Global South. Unfortunately, not all households in the region are provided with stable broadband connections. For example, it is reported that one in four students still have no internet connection in South Africa. Without stable and high-speed internet, it is impossible for students to participate in the process of distance learning. As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization states, connectivity differences create unequal learning opportunities. Moreover, they

negatively impact vulnerable groups of students, among them being those having disabilities.

The lack of accessibility in online learning content constitutes another issue that hinders students from acquiring knowledge and skills. Some educational platforms do not use principles of universal design to make content easily accessible to all students. For instance, screen-reader compatibility, captions, sign language translation, and alternative text are important features to enable visually impaired students, students with hearing impairments, and others to learn more efficiently. UNICEF reports that children with disabilities remain invisible for digital education policy-makers because of this problem. Thus, they continue to experience inequality.

Finally, the lack of adequate technical infrastructure constitutes a major challenge. Not only do students face connectivity problems; they lack appropriate devices to use. They may be deprived of opportunities to work with computers and other equipment due to its low availability in their homes. In addition, power cuts can negatively impact their work in distance learning courses. The lack of devices in conjunction with unreliable Internet access and unstable electricity supply creates serious problems for students with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

All the aforementioned challenges have become especially relevant for children with disabilities due to the combination of factors preventing them from using digital technologies to study. Apart from economic reasons, these include social stigma, poor support within institutions, and ineffective implementation of policies in Global South countries. Intersectionality increases the probability that a particular person will suffer from exclusion and will not be provided with proper access to education.

At the same time, assistive technologies have a lot of potential to improve access to digital education. There are numerous tools used to help individuals with different impairments to learn better. For example, speech-to-text and screen reading programs and augmentative and alternative communication devices help people to communicate and acquire necessary skills. Adaptive learning platforms can also benefit students with special needs. To provide more opportunities for these students, the use of mentioned technologies requires certain conditions to be met.

In conclusion, digital education is a phenomenon that may both promote and prevent the development of the educational sphere in Global South countries. Thus, the improvement of Internet access, digital content, and infrastructure is required to avoid discrimination. Moreover, a rights-based and inclusive approach should be adopted to ensure positive outcomes of digitalization.

11. Discussion: Rethinking Inclusion Through a Global South Lens

Inclusive education in the Global South calls for an approach that is rooted in context and closely aligned with local realities, rather than relying solely on universal policy frameworks. Although international agendas such as those advanced by UNESCO advocate equitable education for all, their application in countries like India highlights the limitations of policy-led strategies when detached from ground-level conditions.

A key factor shaping inclusion is the socio-cultural environment. In many Global South contexts, disability is intertwined with stigma, traditional beliefs, and social hierarchies. In India, for instance, disability is often linked to marginalization, influencing both school access and participation (Singal, 2006). These deeply embedded attitudes cannot be transformed through legislation alone; they require sustained awareness-building, shifts in perception, and culturally responsive interventions. Inclusive education, therefore, must be adapted to local contexts rather than imposed as a universal model.

Resource constraints further complicate implementation. Many schools lack essential infrastructure such as accessible classrooms, trained personnel, and assistive technologies (Srivastava et al., 2015). Even with progressive legislation like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), practical outcomes remain uneven due to financial

and institutional limitations. This disconnect underscores the need for realistic, scalable, and cost-effective solutions that align with available resources.

Community involvement is another critical dimension. Top-down policies often fail to reflect the lived experiences of children with disabilities and their families. Engaging local communities, parents, and grassroots organizations helps ensure that inclusion efforts are relevant and responsive. As Ainscow (2005) emphasizes, inclusion is fundamentally a social process that depends on shared responsibility. In India, community-driven initiatives have shown tangible success in narrowing the gap between policy and practice, particularly in underserved regions.

These realities make it clear that a purely policy-driven approach is insufficient. Inclusive education must instead be participatory, decentralized, and intersectional. Participation ensures that all stakeholders have a voice in shaping educational practices. Decentralization allows flexibility for local adaptation. An intersectional lens acknowledges how disability interacts with caste, gender, and class (Mehrotra, 2013), revealing layered disadvantages—such as those faced by a disabled girl from a marginalized rural background—that cannot be addressed through uniform policies.

India's experience demonstrates that strong legal frameworks alone do not guarantee equitable outcomes. Despite foundational policies like the Right to Education Act (2009) and NEP 2020, systemic challenges such as inadequate teacher training, persistent stigma, and institutional inefficiencies remain. As Slee (2011) argues, meaningful inclusion requires transforming the education system itself, not simply inserting marginalized learners into existing structures.

Ultimately, achieving disability inclusion in the Global South demands a holistic and context-sensitive transformation. Policies must be reinforced by grassroots engagement, innovative use of resources, and a nuanced understanding of intersecting inequalities. Only through such comprehensive efforts can inclusive education shift from aspiration to lived reality.

12. Recommendations

To bridge the persistent gap between policy and practice in disability inclusion, a multi-dimensional and context-sensitive approach is essential.

12.1 Strengthening Implementation Mechanisms

Strengthening implementation mechanisms is crucial to ensure that inclusive education policies translate into real outcomes. In India and across the Global South, there is a persistent gap between policy design and actual practice. Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are essential for tracking progress, identifying challenges, and maintaining accountability. Tools such as regular audits, data-driven evaluations, and feedback mechanisms can help determine whether policies are effectively reaching marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2020). Without such structured monitoring, policies risk remaining largely symbolic rather than producing tangible change.

At the same time, greater financial investment in inclusive education is vital. Many schools do not have sufficient resources to provide assistive technologies, hire trained educators, or build accessible infrastructure. Public spending must treat inclusive education as a central priority within broader equity-focused development strategies (World Bank, 2018). Moreover, decentralizing budget allocation can enable local institutions to respond more effectively to specific contextual needs, improving the overall impact of inclusion efforts.

12.2 Teacher Training and Capacity Building

Educators play a pivotal role in making inclusive education effective, yet many teachers in India and similar contexts are not adequately prepared to address diverse learning needs. Introducing compulsory training on inclusive education within pre-service teacher programs can provide teachers with essential knowledge about disability, differentiated instruction, and inclusive teaching methods (Singal, 2019).

At the same time, continuous professional development (CPD) is equally critical. Inclusion is not a static skill but an ongoing process that requires teachers to continuously adapt to evolving classroom realities. Opportunities such as workshops, peer-learning networks, and digital training platforms can support this process. Research shows that sustained professional development enhances both teacher attitudes and inclusive classroom practices (Ainscow, 2005). Without ongoing capacity building, even well-crafted policies are unlikely to succeed at the classroom level.

12.3 Community and Parental Engagement

Inclusive education depends heavily on the active participation of both families and communities. Efforts to reduce stigma are especially important in contexts where disability is linked to social exclusion. Initiatives such as public awareness campaigns, community-based workshops, and school outreach programs can help challenge negative perceptions and encourage greater acceptance (UNICEF, 2021).

In addition, strong partnerships between schools and communities enhance the support available to children with disabilities. When schools collaborate with parents, local organizations, and health services, it creates a more comprehensive and responsive educational environment. Evidence shows that parental involvement improves both learning outcomes and retention rates for children with disabilities (Srivastava et al., 2015). At the same time, community engagement strengthens accountability and helps build a more inclusive culture that extends beyond the classroom.

12.4 Investment in Infrastructure and Technology

Accessibility in terms of physical and technological infrastructure is a prerequisite for an inclusive education system. Ramps, accessible washrooms, and barrier-free classrooms make it possible for disabled students to engage actively within the school environment. Despite having policies in place, it is often seen that Indian schools are deprived of such infrastructures (Government of India, 2016).

Furthermore, advancements in technology in the form of assistive tools like screen readers, Braille documents, and adaptive software can greatly improve learning experiences. In the wake of online learning, the importance of making online platforms accessible cannot be ignored. Technology, if appropriately distributed, is a potent tool for achieving inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020).

12.5 Intersectional Policy Approach

The intersectional approach emphasizes that disability does not exist in isolation but overlaps with other forms of disadvantage such as caste, gender, and poverty. Addressing these layered inequalities requires targeted interventions tailored to marginalized groups. For example, children with disabilities from rural or lower-caste backgrounds face multiple, context-specific barriers that demand nuanced policy responses (Mehrotra, 2013).

In addition, gender-sensitive strategies are crucial for effective inclusion. Girls with disabilities remain among the most excluded groups, often facing barriers related to safety, accessibility, and restrictive socio-cultural norms. Policies must directly respond to these challenges to improve their participation in education. An intersectional framework ensures that inclusion efforts are both equitable and grounded in the diverse realities individuals experience (Naraian, 2017).

Taken together, these insights underline that inclusive education cannot be addressed through isolated measures. It requires a comprehensive and multi-layered strategy—one that strengthens implementation, builds teacher capacity, engages communities, improves infrastructure, and integrates intersectional perspectives. Such an approach is essential for achieving meaningful and equitable education outcomes across the Global South.

13. Conclusion

Inclusion and educational equity for persons with disabilities remain pressing challenges across the Global South, despite notable policy advancements.

Many countries, including India, have introduced progressive legal frameworks to support inclusive education, such as the Right to Education Act (2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and the National Education Policy (2020). However, these commitments often face significant obstacles in practice, including inadequate infrastructure, insufficiently trained teachers, and weak accountability systems (Singal, 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015). As a result, a clear gap persists between policy intent and actual implementation.

This gap underscores the need for a more comprehensive and intersectional approach. Disability inclusion must be understood within wider social dynamics, where caste, gender, poverty, and rural-urban divides intersect to influence access to education and learning outcomes (Mehrotra, 2013). Ignoring these overlapping inequalities risks reducing inclusion to a superficial exercise. At the same time, community engagement is critical for challenging stigma and reshaping attitudes toward disability, which often act as major barriers to participation (Miles & Singal, 2010).

Broader systemic reforms are equally necessary. Strengthening teacher training, improving accessible infrastructure, expanding the use of assistive technologies, and establishing effective monitoring mechanisms are all key components. Inclusive education should go beyond ensuring school entry and focus on enabling meaningful participation and learning for all students (Ainscow, 2005).

Ultimately, turning policy commitments into tangible outcomes requires sustained political will, adequate investment, and a strong commitment to social justice. Only through such integrated and context-sensitive efforts can inclusive education become a lived reality for learners across the Global South.

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