

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Disability Construction in India's Inclusive Education Policy Texts

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ABSTRACT:

Inclusive education policy increasingly uses rights-based language, yet policy discourse may continue to construct disabled learners through welfare, administrative, and deficit-oriented assumptions. This study critically examines how disability is represented in India's inclusive education policy texts. Using a qualitative, document-based Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analysed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the National Education Policy 2020, with the UNCRPD used as an international rights-based benchmark. A dictionary-guided, CDA-informed rule-based coding procedure was applied to 107 disability-education-relevant units, including 80 from Indian policy texts and 27 from the UNCRPD. The findings show that Indian policy discourse has moved toward rights, equity, access, and inclusion, but this shift remains incomplete. Rights-based construction accounted for 51.85% of UNCRPD coded units but only 11.25% of the Indian corpus, while policy silence or limited elaboration formed the largest Indian category. The study concludes that Indian policy texts construct disability through layered discourses in which rights-based commitments coexist with welfare, support, administrative classification, paternalistic naming, and add-on inclusion, with implications for policy reform.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; disability construction; inclusive education; Indian education policy; UNCRPD

1. Introduction

The core of inclusive education is the link between school and equity, participation, dignity and social justice, which has made it a major tenet in the policy of modern education. In the disability field and in special education, inclusion is no longer defined as being physically included in the mainstream school, but also as having an accessible environment, as being meaningfully included, as having learner agency, as having flexible curriculum, and as having the responsibility of the institution. The United

Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has reinforced the global policy change to inclusive education with a focus on non-discrimination, reasonable accommodation, accessibility and the right of persons with disabilities to participate in education on an equal basis with others. The concept of inclusive education is however not uncontested in different jurisdictions and even rights-based approaches can be differently understood in the national policy context (Byrne, 2022). The concept of inclusive education in India has been evolving over a multilevel legal and policy

framework, such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, and National Education Policy 2020. These documents are part of an important shift from an access-based to an equity, participation and inclusion-based approach to schooling. Meanwhile, the Indian disability-policy landscape persists in highlighting conflicts between the rights-based aspirations and institutional realities. However, as civil society views have pointed to the ongoing violations of rights and ableist practices in state institutions in India, it has raised awareness about the fact that the implementation of CRPD does not necessarily change lived educational conditions for persons with disabilities (PWD) (Chaney, 2020). It is not only the meaning of policy that is significant for analysis, but also the policy language; official texts do not simply represent what disability is, but they also shape the identity of disabled learners, the demands they make and the responses of the educational system to them. The problem addressed in this study is the gap between progressive inclusive education vocabulary and the deeper discursive assumptions embedded in policy texts. The use of the terms inclusion, equity, access, support, accommodation, participation, etc. has been gaining traction in Indian policy documents. However, these terms can be used alongside language which can suggest that disabled learners are the recipients of welfare, the object of intervention, an administratively designated subject or a learner for whom special provision is required outside of the mainstream of schooling. UNESCO (2020) emphasizes that inclusion in education does not mean that the education system must adapt to learner diversity but that the barriers must be eliminated. In this light the question arises as to what Indian inclusive education policy does or doesn't do with disability: does it see disability as a rights issue, or as a condition that needs to be managed with support, certification, special services or compensatory measures. In this study, Critical Discourse Analysis is used to study this issue. It is centered on the ways in which a range of Indian policy and legal documents have produced the notion of disability, of disabled learners, of inclusion and access, and of institutional responsibility. The study is not designed to assess the implementation or classroom practices at the school level within special education scholarship. Rather, it examines the

language of disability policy as a discursive space in which the meanings of disability and inclusion are created. This scope is intentional. There is evidence that interventions in low- and lower-middle-income countries often rely on resources and training as well as on the conceptualisation of inclusive education in systems and policies (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024). So, analysis of policy talk can help to uncover the assumptions underlying implementation. The study focuses on selected official documents and excludes the interviews with teachers, parents, disabled learners and policy makers. It also does not assess learning outcomes nor does it compare state-level implementation. It is text and interpretation based. This is a methodological strength, however, as a close reading of policy discourse can uncover patterns not discerned from implementation studies. For instance, while assistive technology is frequently mentioned as a tool to support students with disabilities, technology is inclusive when integrated into the wider accessibility, pedagogy and participation landscape (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022). In the same way, differentiation and individualisation are key elements of inclusive classrooms, but must be planned pedagogically in a systemic way, not as isolated support (Lindner & Schwab, 2025).

The value of this study is in the context of disability, policy discourse and inclusive education in India. In the context of equity in primary education, NEP 2020 has been termed as a significant reform framework that underlines the importance of foundational learning and system transformation (Ansari, 2025). However, the use of inclusive language is not sufficient to make disability an "agency" and "rights" and "participation" construction. This study examines the naming practices, modality, categorisation, agency, silences and disability models to gain insight into the way the language of Indian policies can both support and potentially hinder inclusive education. It also provides relevance for special educators, policy analysts, teacher educators, and disability rights scholars who are interested in the policy discourse/educational justice nexus.

The objectives of the study are:

- To examine how disability and disabled learners are named, categorised, and represented in selected Indian inclusive education policy texts.

- To analyse whether disability is constructed through rights-based, social, welfare, medical/deficit, administrative, or paternalistic discourses.
- To compare Indian policy/legal discourse with the UNCRPD benchmark in order to identify shifts, continuities, and limitations in the construction of inclusive education.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education is now increasingly presented as an equity, participation and social justice question and not just a placement problem. Current discussions focus on the meaning of inclusion beyond the mere presence of disabled learners in the mainstream classroom, and it is important to ensure that the environment is accessible, pedagogy is flexible, the school is responsive, learners have some control, and there are no structural barriers. The study of inclusive education is a field of practice and a field of evaluation, as there are still unresolved questions concerning the scope and limits, the empirical basis and conceptual purpose of inclusive education (Norwich (2022)). This is significant for the current research as inclusive language is frequently used in policy texts without clarifying which mode of inclusion is being used: access, participation, accommodation, transformation, or special support.

The NEP 2020 has emerged as a significant benchmark in the Indian education landscape. Aktar (2021) defines NEP 2020 as a comprehensive conceptual change in Indian education, which focuses on equity, quality, multi-disciplinary learning, and institutional reform. But there are also terms in the reform lexicon that do not necessarily result in disability being framed in rights-based or transformative ways. In their study on inclusion and equity in NEP 2020, Rangarajan et al. (2025) demonstrates that the policy needs to be analysed not just on the basis of its commitments and promises but also on how it is embedded in the Indian educational context with respect to inclusion, relevance, participation, and quality. This goes to support the need to read NEP 2020 in a discourse manner and not merely in a descriptive way and summarizing its provisions.

International disability-rights frameworks also shape how inclusive education should be interpreted. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020) provides Article 24 indicators that connect education with availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability, non-discrimination, and reasonable accommodation. These indicators are useful because they clarify that the right to inclusive education is not fulfilled through enrolment alone. Slee (2018) similarly argues that inclusion must be understood as a challenge to exclusionary educational structures, rather than as a technical adjustment for learners who are marked as different. Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of analysing whether policy language frames disability as a systemic issue or as a learner-based problem requiring individual support.

Research on disabled learners' experiences further shows that inclusive education must be understood from the perspective of participation and belonging. Paul et al. (2022), in a meta-aggregative review of children and youth with disabilities, demonstrate that learners' experiences of inclusion are shaped by peer relationships, teacher attitudes, accessibility, support, and recognition of voice. This is relevant to policy discourse because texts that construct disabled learners only as recipients of services may weaken their representation as active participants in education. Haug (2021) also shows that pupils' experiences of inclusive schooling depend on the learning environment, suggesting that inclusion must be assessed through lived educational conditions and not merely through policy declarations.

There is limited evidence to show that inclusive education is implemented in a non-uniform manner in India, particularly in government schools in rural areas where children with disabilities are less likely to attend school. Taneja-Johansson et al. (2023) call attention to the significant disparities in access, participation, support, and institutional capacity for children with disabilities in the education of the rural population in India, reflecting an education that is still a long journey towards inclusion. The report on children with disabilities in India, by UNESCO, also points to the need for better systems and structures of support and increased commitment to disability inclusive education (UNESCO, 2019). The UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (2021) also

emphasizes that disability-inclusive practices need a coordinated approach in identifying disabilities, making things accessible, teacher preparation, providing assistive support, engaging families, and fostering an inclusive school culture.

Teacher capacity and professional development form another major strand in the literature. Donath et al. (2023) demonstrate that professional development can facilitate the implementation of inclusive education but its impact is linked to its content, duration, practice relevance and the extent to which it alters teacher knowledge, attitudes, and classroom practices. This links directly to policy discourse in that if the policy focuses on special educators or extra support for inclusion, then the responsibility of the whole school system and all teachers may be minimised. Assistive technology is often given as a solution for inclusion, too. The World Health Organization (2022) however, emphasizes the need to see assistive technology as a component of broader accessibility systems, and not as an individual intervention.

Policy language can be further explored through critical disability scholarship. Van Aswegen and Shevlin (2019) demonstrate how Critical Discourse Analysis can be used to uncover the ideologies embedded in what are considered to be progressive policies and practices in education, which may reproduce discourses and ableist assumptions. This is particularly important for the current study as the concept of inclusive education in India could be expressed in rights terms and yet be framed in a welfare, deficit, administrative or paternalistic manner in relation to the disabled learner. Taneja-Johansson and Singal (2025) suggest that cross-context learning and a focus on structural inequalities are essential for pathways to inclusive and equitable quality education. This research therefore places policy language as a key arena in which the interpretations of what disability is, what inclusion is, what agency is, and what educational justice is shaped and challenged.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is qualitative document based research which takes Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. It looks at the construction of the term disability and disabled learners in the Indian inclusive education policy texts. The issue is not one of outcomes of implementation, but one of language, in which disability, inclusion, access, support, rights and institutional responsibility are defined by a policy. This design is suitable for special education research as the language of a policy document has the potential to shape the perceptions of disabled learners and the type of support or entitlement they are expected to receive in educational systems, schools, teachers, and administrators.

The study is guided by Fairclough's three dimensional CDA framework which considers discourse as being interrelated with text, discursive practice and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 2023). It analyzes at the textual level vocabulary, naming practices, modality, categorisation and agency. It looks at the discursive level by examining the ways in which the language of disability is brought in, adapted, or limited in policy/legal discourse in India. At the sociocultural level it decodes these patterns in the context of ableism, bureaucratic classification, welfare traditions, rights-based reform, and between the inclusive education and special provision.

3.2 Corpus Selection and Justification

The corpus includes four official documents: the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, National Education Policy 2020 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The RTE Act lays the foundation of the discourse on educational access and compulsory schooling (Government of India, 2009), and the RPWD Act sets out India's disability-rights framework, inclusive education and reasonable accommodation (Government of India, 2016). The current education policy is NEP 2020 which focuses on home-based education, assistive devices, children with disabilities, equity and inclusion (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is the international rights-based standard for disability, inclusion, equality, accessibility and participation (United Nations, 2006).

These texts were selected because they represent key stages in the evolution of inclusive education discourse in India. Together, they enable analysis of how disability is constructed across educational entitlement, disability-rights legislation, and contemporary policy, while allowing comparison with an international rights-based standard.

3.3 Data Preparation and Text Extraction

All four documents were processed as PDF files using Python. Text was extracted at page level using PyMuPDF. The extraction produced 146 pages across the corpus: 66 pages from NEP 2020, 36 pages from RPWD 2016, 16 pages from RTE 2009, and 28 pages from UNCRPD. No empty pages were detected after extraction. The extracted text was then cleaned through conservative preprocessing, which removed repeated metadata, page headers, web links, page labels, and formatting noise while preserving policy-relevant wording. No stopword removal, stemming, or lemmatisation was applied. CDA depends on exact wording; therefore, terms such as “shall,” “may,” “must,” “should,” “will,” “support,” “care,” “barrier,” “reasonable accommodation,” “Divyang,” and “home-based education” were deliberately retained.

3.4 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the disability-education-relevant clause or sentence unit. Because legal and policy documents frequently contain long clauses, enumerated provisions, and semicolon-heavy lists, simple sentence splitting was insufficient. To create clause-sensitive units, a refined segmentation procedure was performed to identify the boundaries of sentences, the presence of articles and section markers, numbered clauses, sub-clause markers, and legal lists based on semicolon. The resulting units that were produced averaged around 34-37 words across the corpus, which gave sufficient context in which to interpret the text and provided for systematic comparisons.

3.5 Keyword Anchoring and Excerpt Selection

A dictionary-guided search procedure was used to identify relevant excerpts. The keyword dictionary was developed from CDA, disability studies, and inclusive education concepts. It included code families related to naming and categorisation, rights

and entitlements, access and barriers, accommodation and support, medical-deficit and welfare discourse, inclusion and placement, agency and modality, and policy silences.

An initial broad keyword search was refined because general terms such as “support,” “access,” “shall,” and “may” retrieved many non-disability-specific policy units. A stricter disability-anchored procedure was therefore applied. Units were retained only when they contained disability-related anchors, such as “disability,” “children with disabilities,” “persons with disabilities,” “benchmark disability,” “Divyang,” “reasonable accommodation,” “inclusive education,” “home-based education,” “assistive devices,” or “special educators,” and were connected to education, schooling, learning, children, teachers, curriculum, or participation. This produced 107 coded units: 34 from NEP 2020, 38 from RPWD 2016, 8 from RTE 2009, and 27 from UNCRPD.

3.6 CDA-Informed Rule-Based Coding

The study used a dictionary-guided, CDA-informed rule-based qualitative text analysis. Predefined rules derived from CDA, disability studies, and inclusive education theory were applied to the selected excerpts. The procedure assigned categories for primary CDA code, disability model, agency pattern, inclusion logic, modality pattern, and result-section theme. Primary CDA codes included rights-based construction, social-barrier construction, administrative category, welfare/support construction, medical/deficit construction, paternalistic naming, add-on inclusion, systemic transformation, home-based provision, and policy silence or limited elaboration. Because the study used a dictionary-guided, rule-based CDA procedure, the analysis does not claim inter-rater reliability; instead, it offers a systematic critical textual interpretation of policy discourse

3.7 Analytical Strategy

The coded results were analyzed in the three Indian texts and with the UNCRPD standard. Dominant discourse patterns were identified using descriptive frequencies and an interpretation was qualitative and critical. The analysis of the texts looked at the naming of disability, the attribution of agency, the use of the term “inclusion” as a transformation or as a support,

and limited uses of rights language in administrative, welfare, medical, or paternalistic assumptions. Final tables and figures were utilized to support the Results section and link the findings to the special education, inclusive education policy, ableism and disability-rights discourse.

4. Results

4.1 Corpus Profile of Coded Disability-Education Units

The corpus profile in Table 1 shows that the final CDA-informed rule-based analysis produced 107 disability-education-relevant coded units across the

four selected documents. The Indian policy/legal corpus contributed 80 coded units, while the UNCRPD benchmark contributed 27 coded units. Within the Indian corpus, the RPWD Act 2016 generated the largest number of coded units, followed by NEP 2020 and RTE 2009. This distribution reflects the different textual purposes of the documents. RPWD 2016 is directly concerned with disability rights, NEP 2020 contains a specific inclusive education discussion within a broader education-policy framework, and RTE 2009 addresses disability only in a limited way within a general right-to-education framework.

Table 1. Corpus profile of coded disability-education units

Document	Year	Coded units	Mean words per coded unit	Total words in coded units
National Education Policy	2020	34	51.79	1,761
Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act	2016	38	35.89	1,364
Right to Education Act	2009	8	46.12	369
UNCRPD benchmark	2006	27	37.04	1,000
Total	—	107	—	4,494

The relatively small number of coded units in RTE 2009 is analytically important. It indicates that disability is not strongly elaborated in the earlier education-rights law. By contrast, RPWD 2016 and NEP 2020 contain more explicit disability-related discourse, although the nature of that discourse differs across the two documents.

4.2 Distribution of Primary CDA Codes

The code distribution in

Figure 1 indicates that disability is constructed through multiple and sometimes competing discourses rather than through a single stable rights-based vocabulary.

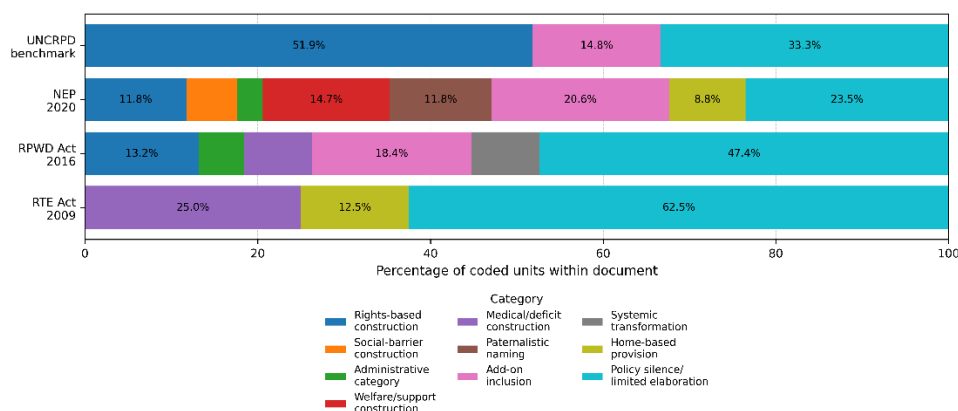


Figure 1. CDA code distribution by document

In NEP 2020, the most frequent code is policy silence or limited elaboration, accounting for 23.53% of coded units. This is followed by add-on inclusion at 20.59%, welfare/support construction at 14.71%, and both rights-based construction and paternalistic naming at 11.76% each. This pattern suggests that NEP 2020 uses the language of inclusion and equity, but also frames disabled learners through support mechanisms, special educators, assistive devices, home-based provision, and the term “Divyang.” The discourse therefore combines progressive vocabulary with compensatory and paternalistic elements.

The dominant code patterns summarised in Table 2 show that RPWD 2016 is also marked by discursive

tension. Its largest category is policy silence or limited elaboration, representing 47.37% of coded units. This is followed by add-on inclusion at 18.42% and rights-based construction at 13.16%. Although RPWD 2016 is the central disability-rights statute in the Indian corpus, its language frequently moves through classification, eligibility, duties, institutional procedures, and support arrangements. RTE 2009 is even more limited: 62.50% of its coded units fall under policy silence or limited elaboration, while 25.00% fall under medical/deficit construction. In contrast, UNCRPD is dominated by rights-based construction, which accounts for 51.85% of its coded units.

Table 2. Dominant and secondary CDA code patterns by document

Document	Dominant CDA code	Units	Percentage	Secondary pattern
NEP 2020	Policy silence / limited elaboration	8	23.53%	Add-on inclusion: 20.59%
RPWD 2016	Policy silence / limited elaboration	18	47.37%	Add-on inclusion: 18.42%
RTE 2009	Policy silence / limited elaboration	5	62.50%	Medical/deficit: 25.00%
UNCRPD	Rights-based construction	14	51.85%	Policy silence / limited elaboration: 33.33%

4.3 Indian Policy/Legal Corpus Compared with the UNCRPD Benchmark

The comparison presented in Figure 2 demonstrates a clear contrast between the Indian policy/legal corpus and the UNCRPD benchmark.

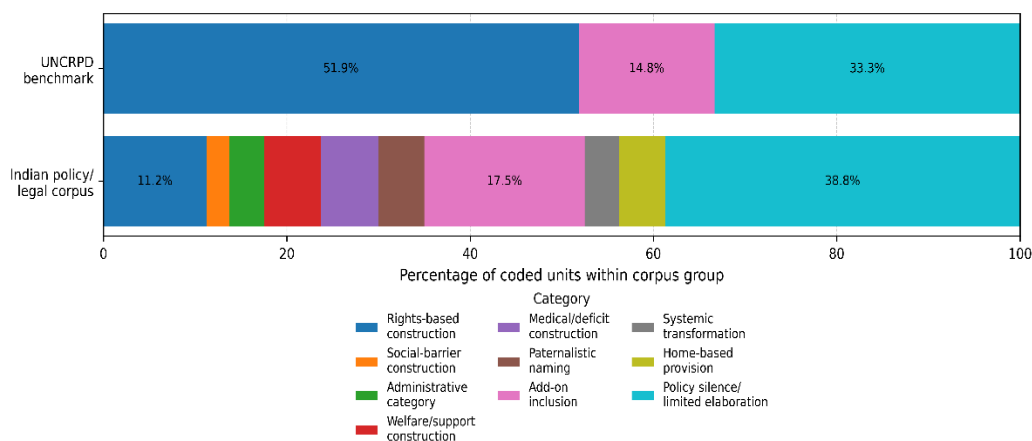


Figure 2. Indian corpus and UNCRPD benchmark by CDA code

The Indian corpus contains only 11.25% rights-based construction, whereas UNCRPD contains 51.85%. This difference is substantial because it shows that rights-based discourse is much more central to the international benchmark than to the Indian texts taken together. Conversely, the Indian corpus shows greater dispersion across several categories, including policy silence, add-on inclusion, medical/deficit construction, welfare/support construction, home-based provision, paternalistic naming, administrative category, systemic transformation, and social-barrier construction.

The comparative data in Table 3 further indicate that several categories appear only in the Indian corpus. These include medical/deficit construction, welfare/support construction, home-based provision, paternalistic naming, administrative category, systemic transformation, and social-barrier construction. This does not mean that Indian policy texts are simply exclusionary. Rather, it suggests that Indian inclusive education policy combines rights language with older welfare, bureaucratic, compensatory, and classificatory traditions. UNCRPD, by contrast, is more consistently organised around dignity, equality, participation, non-discrimination, and accessibility.

Table 3. Indian corpus versus UNCRPD benchmark by CDA code

CDA code	Indian corpus units	Indian corpus %	UNCRPD units	UNCRPD %
Rights-based construction	9	11.25%	14	51.85%
Add-on inclusion	14	17.50%	4	14.81%
Policy silence / limited elaboration	31	38.75%	9	33.33%
Medical/deficit construction	5	6.25%	0	0.00%
Welfare/support construction	5	6.25%	0	0.00%
Home-based provision	4	5.00%	0	0.00%
Paternalistic naming	4	5.00%	0	0.00%
Administrative category	3	3.75%	0	0.00%
Systemic transformation	3	3.75%	0	0.00%
Social-barrier construction	2	2.50%	0	0.00%

4.4 Disability Model Distribution

The disability-model pattern shown in Figure 3 clarifies how each document conceptually frames disability.

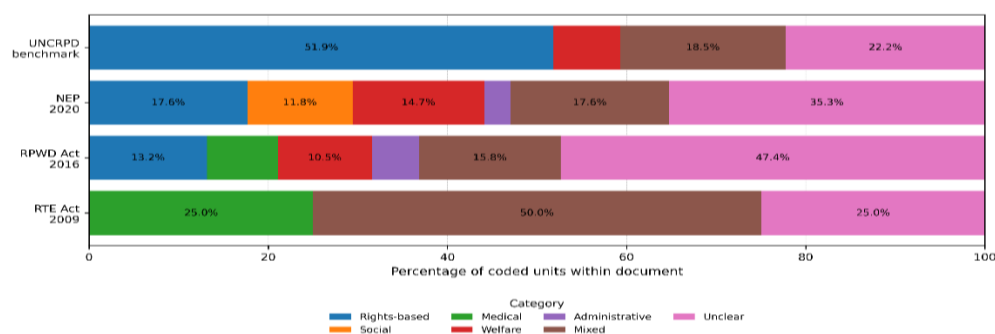


Figure 3. Disability model distribution by document

UNCRPD has the strongest rights-based orientation, with 51.85% of coded units classified as rights-based. NEP 2020 is more mixed: 35.29% of its units are coded as unclear, 17.65% as rights-based, 17.65% as mixed, 14.71% as welfare, and 11.76% as social. This indicates that NEP 2020 does not rely on a single disability model. Instead, it combines rights-oriented language with welfare, support, and institutional accommodation.

The model distribution in Table 4 also shows that RPWD 2016 has the highest proportion of unclear

model coding, at 47.37%. This is followed by mixed, rights-based, welfare, medical, and administrative models. The Act therefore performs a dual function: it advances disability rights, but it also organises disability through certification, eligibility, institutional duties, and forms of state-supported provision. RTE 2009 shows no rights-based or social-model coding in the final analysis. Its disability-related units are distributed across medical, mixed, and unclear categories, reinforcing the finding that disability remains marginal in the earlier education-entitlement discourse.

Table 4. Disability model distribution by document

Document	Rights-based	Social	Medical	Welfare	Administrative	Mixed	Unclear
NEP 2020	17.65%	11.76%	0.00%	14.71%	2.94%	17.65%	35.29%
RPWD 2016	13.16%	0.00%	7.89%	10.53%	5.26%	15.79%	47.37%
RTE 2009	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	25.00%
UNCRPD	51.85%	0.00%	0.00%	7.41%	0.00%	18.52%	22.22%

4.5 Thematic Distribution of Evidence

The evidence distribution in Figure 4 identifies the strongest interpretive themes emerging from the coded corpus.

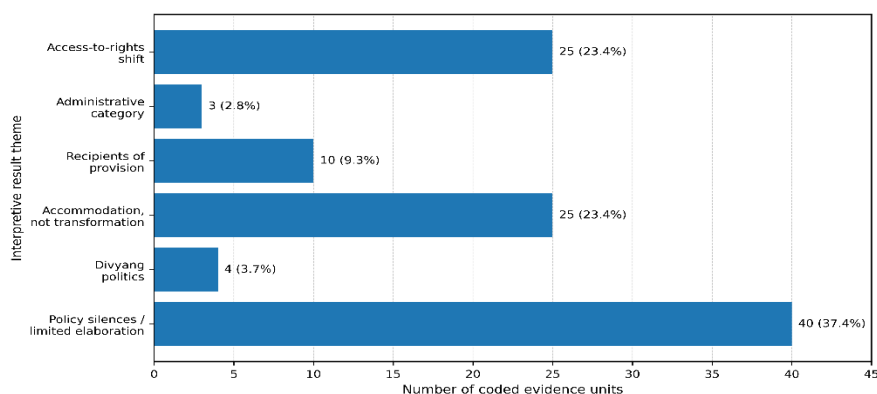


Figure 4. Coded evidence across interpretive result themes

Policy silences or limited elaboration form the largest theme, with 40 units, or 37.4% of the total coded evidence. Access-to-rights shift and accommodation-not-transformation each account for 25 units, or 23.4%. Recipients of provision accounts for 10 units, while Divyang politics and administrative category account for smaller but analytically significant shares. This distribution shows that the strongest result is not simply the presence of rights language, but the coexistence of rights language with limited

elaboration, add-on accommodation, and institutional management.

Overall, the results indicate that Indian inclusive education policy discourse has moved toward rights, equity, inclusion, and participation, especially in RPWD 2016 and NEP 2020. However, this shift remains incomplete. Disabled learners are still frequently constructed as recipients of support, objects of institutional intervention, administratively

classified subjects, or learners requiring compensatory provision. The results thus indicate that Indian policy texts are not a direct line from exclusion to inclusion. Rather, they create a multi-layered discourse in which the rights-based commitments co-exist with welfare, bureaucratic, paternalistic, medical/deficit and add-on constructions of disability.

Discussion

The findings show that the discourse of the rights, equity, access and participation is now becoming part of the Indian inclusive education policy in an increasing manner, but the process is still uneven. A total of 107 codes for disability-education units were identified: 80 codes were found in Indian policy texts and 27 codes were found in the UNCRPD. RPWD 2016 contained the most coded units (38), followed by NEP 2020 (34) and RTE 2009 (8). While disability is more prominently featured in RPWD 2016 and NEP 2020, the discourse is still ambiguous, with a mix of rights-based concepts and welfare, administrative, medical/deficit, paternalistic, and add-on inclusion visions.

It's a stark contrast to the UNCRPD benchmark. Only 11.25% of the Indian corpus was coded under rights based construction while the UNCRPD corpus had 51.85%. The Indian corpus, however, consisted of policy silence or elaboration in 38.75% of the cases. This indicates that disability and inclusion are acknowledged in Indian policies, and there is little discussion of agency, participation, and system change. The finding corroborates Byrne's (2022) perspectives on the different understandings of inclusive education rights in policy contexts. Indian policies use a rights-based language and often express a conception of inclusion in terms of welfare, support and administrative processes.

The results also reveal that policy language, even when using terms that are inclusive, can promulgate ableist assumptions. The NEP 2020 saw policy silence or some elaboration on it as 23.53% of coded units and add-on inclusion as 20.59%, paternalistic naming as 11.76% and welfare/support construction as 14.71% of coded units. Disabled learners are frequently portrayed as the consumers of support and not as rights bearing actors in the patterns. This aligns with the claim made by Van Aswegen and

Shevlin (2019) that it is possible to maintain an ableist tone in the seemingly progressive educational conversation.

The results further support the claim that inclusion cannot be reduced to access, enrolment, or the availability of supportive devices. UNESCO's worldwide inclusive education system emphasizes that inclusive education should be provided by systems to respond to diversity in learners, instead of learners adapting to the systems (UNESCO, 2020). However, the present findings reveal that there is not much evidence of systemic-transformation discourse in the Indian corpus, where the total number of coded units for systemic transformation and social-barrier construction are 3.75% and 2.50% respectively. This is analytically significant as it demonstrates that not all barriers are perceived as a result of a lack of accessibility of the school environment, institutional design and ableism. Rather, policy expressions tend to be focused on support, classification and accommodation.

The disability-model results strengthen this interpretation. UNCRPD showed the strongest rights-based model at 51.85%, while NEP 2020 had a mixed profile: 35.29% unclear, 17.65% rights-based, 17.65% mixed, 14.71% welfare, and 11.76% social. RPWD 2016 had the highest unclear-model coding at 47.37%, despite being India's principal disability-rights statute. RTE 2009 showed no rights-based or social-model coding in the final analysis, with its coded units distributed across medical, mixed, and unclear categories. These patterns suggest that Indian inclusive education discourse has not fully shifted from disability as classification or support need toward disability as a rights, participation, and barrier-removal issue.

These findings have direct implications for special education policy, teacher education, and disability-rights advocacy. When policy language frames disabled learners mainly as recipients of support or as administratively classified subjects, special education provision may remain compensatory rather than transformative. Therefore, policy language should represent disabled learners more consistently as rights-bearing educational participants rather than as beneficiaries of care or institutional support. Inclusive education policy should also define

accommodation as part of whole-school transformation rather than as an add-on response for selected learners. Special educators should be prepared not only to provide individualised support but also to identify ableist assumptions in policy, school planning, assessment, and classroom discourse. Teacher education programmes should connect disability rights, reasonable accommodation, universal design, and learner agency so that inclusion is treated as a whole-school responsibility rather than a specialist add-on service. These implications are especially relevant in India, where children with disabilities continue to face persistent barriers to meaningful inclusion in government schools (Taneja-Johansson et al., 2023).

The study has limitations. It is based on selected national-level policy/legal texts and does not examine state-level policies, implementation guidelines, textbooks, teacher-training materials, or classroom practices. It also does not include interviews with disabled learners, parents, teachers, administrators, or policymakers. The coding was CDA-informed and rule-based, enabling systematic comparison across documents, but it did not involve multiple human coders or inter-rater reliability testing. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as a critical textual analysis rather than as a direct measure of implementation or lived educational experience.

Future research should extend this analysis in three directions. First, state-level policy documents and implementation guidelines should be examined to determine whether national-level discourses are reproduced, modified, or resisted locally. Second, interviews with disabled learners, families, teachers, and special educators would help connect policy discourse with lived experience. Third, future studies could compare Indian policy discourse with classroom-level practices to examine how official

constructions of disability influence identification, placement, pedagogy, assessment, and participation. Such work would strengthen understanding of how inclusive education is not only written into policy but also interpreted, enacted, and contested in educational practice.

Conclusion

This study examined how disability is constructed in India's inclusive education policy texts through a Critical Discourse Analysis of RTE 2009, RPWD 2016, NEP 2020, and the UNCRPD benchmark. The findings indicate that a rights-based, equity-based, access-based, and inclusion-oriented approach has come to the fore in Indian policy discourse, which is still a work in progress. The Indian corpus had a few fewer rights-based constructions than UNCRPD (107 coded units), but the other constructions were still present, such as policy silence, add-on inclusion, welfare/support, administrative categorisation, paternalistic naming. This suggests that in policy, disabled learners are recognised but not always described as active members of transformed educational systems as rights-holders. Findings of the study have implications for inclusive education policy, special education practice, and teacher preparation. Policy language must go beyond support and compensatory language and explicitly characterize inclusion as systemic change, accessibility, participation and learner agency. Future policy-making is encouraged to include non-paternalist language; to use language that is more powerful to remove barriers; and to include barriers to the whole school, not just as an add-on service. This study should be expanded to the state-level policies, implementation guidelines, teacher education materials, and classroom practices. Interviews with disabled learners, families, teachers and special educators would also assist to link policy discourse to lived experiences in education.

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