



Building an Inclusive Society Through Inclusive Education: A Conceptual Review of Mechanisms, Evidence, and Policy Pathways

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Abstract: *The claim that inclusive education builds an inclusive society is among the most frequently repeated propositions in international education policy, yet the causal pathway it asserts is rarely specified and unevenly evidenced. This conceptual review interrogates the proposition in three steps. First, it clarifies the conceptual foundations of the claim, distinguishing inclusive education as placement, as pedagogy, and as systemic transformation, and situating the education–society link within the social model of disability, the capability approach, and intergroup contact theory. Second, it identifies five candidate mechanisms through which inclusive education could plausibly contribute to social inclusion: attitude formation through sustained childhood contact; human-capital formation and economic participation; the extension of social networks; the normative modelling function of public institutions; and intergenerational transmission of inclusive dispositions. Third, it reviews the empirical evidence bearing on each mechanism, finding that the evidence is strongest for proximal outcomes, academic and social gains for learners with and without disabilities and improved peer attitudes under structured contact, and progressively thinner for the distal societal outcomes the policy claim ultimately asserts. The review then examines the Indian policy architecture, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the National Education Policy 2020, and Samagra Shiksha, arguing that the education–society pathway is conditional rather than automatic: it is most plausibly activated where placement is accompanied by inclusive pedagogy, prepared teachers, structured peer interaction, and system-level support. The paper concludes with a framework of policy conditions under which inclusive education can credibly serve as an instrument of social inclusion, and identifies the longitudinal and India-specific evidence gaps that most urgently require research attention.*

Keywords: *inclusive education; inclusive society; social inclusion; disability; contact theory; capability approach; RPWD Act 2016; National Education Policy 2020; India.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Few propositions command wider assent in contemporary education policy than the claim that inclusive education is an instrument for building an inclusive society. The Salamanca Statement asserted that ordinary schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and building an inclusive society (UNESCO, 1994); Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities grounds inclusive education in the goal of the full development of human potential and effective participation in a free society (United Nations, 2006); and General Comment No. 4 explicates inclusion as a transformation of culture, policy, and practice rather than a matter of physical placement (UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and National Education Policy 2020 adopt the same premise (Government of India, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020).

The very ubiquity of the claim, however, has discouraged its examination. As it circulates in policy discourse, the proposition compresses a long proposed causal pathway, from classroom composition, through pedagogy and peer interaction, to attitudes, capabilities, and participation, into a single assertion, and it is seldom asked which links in that chain are conceptually necessary, which are empirically supported, and which are merely hoped for. Critical scholars have warned that inclusion talk can serve as what Slee (2011) terms a comfortable rhetoric that leaves exclusionary



structures intact, while Ainscow (2020) observes that progress towards inclusion internationally has been uneven precisely because the concept is interpreted in divergent ways. A proposition that is doing this much normative work in national statutes deserves a more exacting treatment.

This paper therefore undertakes a conceptual review with three aims: (a) to clarify what the claim that inclusive education builds an inclusive society asserts, and in which of the several senses of inclusive education it might be true; (b) to specify the candidate mechanisms through which the asserted effect could operate, and to review the empirical evidence bearing on each; and (c) to derive the policy conditions under which the education–society pathway is most plausibly activated, with particular reference to India. The method is that of a narrative conceptual review: the paper does not report new empirical data, and its conclusions are accordingly framed as conditional and hypothesis-generating rather than demonstrative. The review draws on foundational theoretical works, peer-reviewed empirical reviews and meta-analyses, major international reports, and Indian statutory and policy documents, selected purposively for their direct bearing on one or more of the proposed mechanisms. The review is interpretive rather than systematic, and no claim of exhaustive retrieval is made.

2. Conceptual Foundations

Three Senses of Inclusive Education

Precision requires distinguishing at least three senses in which the term inclusive education is used. In its narrowest sense, inclusion denotes placement: the enrolment of learners with disabilities in ordinary classrooms. In a second sense, it denotes pedagogy: teaching that extends what is ordinarily available to all learners rather than differentiating some learners as objects of special provision, the position developed by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) as inclusive pedagogy. In its widest sense, articulated in the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) and in General Comment No. 4, inclusion denotes systemic transformation: a reconstruction of cultures, policies, and practices such that the school itself changes to accommodate diversity. The society-building claim attaches differently to each sense. Placement alone puts bodies in proximity; pedagogy shapes the quality of what proximity delivers; systemic transformation models, at institutional scale, the very social form the claim aspires to produce. Much of the ambiguity in the literature, and much of the disappointment in implementation, arises from asserting the claim in the widest sense while delivering inclusion in the narrowest.

The Social Model, the Capability Approach, and Contact Theory

Three theoretical traditions supply the claim's intellectual scaffolding. The social model of disability locates disability not in individual impairment but in the disabling barriers, attitudinal, architectural, institutional, that society erects (Oliver, 1996); on this view, the segregated school is itself such a barrier, and its dismantling is not merely instrumentally useful but constitutively part of what an inclusive society means. The capability approach reframes the goal of education as the expansion of persons' real freedoms to be and to do what they have reason to value (Sen, 1999), with Nussbaum (2006) arguing explicitly that justice for persons

with disabilities requires social arrangements, education prominent among them, that secure a threshold of central capabilities, including affiliation and participation. Intergroup contact theory supplies the social-psychological mechanism: under conditions of equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support, contact between groups reduces prejudice (Allport, 1954), a prediction sustained, on average, by the meta-analysis of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) across more than five hundred studies. The three traditions converge on a common implication: the classroom is a site where barriers may be dismantled, capabilities formed, and prejudice reduced, but each also specifies conditions, and none warrants the expectation that placement alone will suffice.

3. Five Candidate Mechanisms

If inclusive education contributes to an inclusive society, it must do so through specifiable mechanisms. Five are identifiable in the literature; stating them explicitly renders the policy claim testable.

Attitude Formation Through Sustained Childhood Contact

The first and most direct mechanism is attitudinal: children who learn alongside peers with disabilities, under the



facilitating conditions contact theory specifies, may develop more accepting attitudes that persist into adult civic, economic, and social life. The proximal link is reasonably supported: reviews of children's attitudes indicate that structured, cooperative contact is associated with more positive peer attitudes, though attitudes vary by disability type and contact quality (de Boer et al., 2012). The distal link, persistence into adulthood at population scale, is the weakest evidentiary link in the entire chain, resting largely on extrapolation from general contact research (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) rather than on longitudinal studies of inclusive schooling itself.

Human-Capital Formation and Economic Participation

The second mechanism runs through the learners with disabilities themselves: to the extent that inclusive settings yield stronger academic and social outcomes, they enlarge later capacities for employment, independent living, and civic participation. The evidence for the proximal link is moderately favourable: syntheses report that learners with disabilities in inclusive settings tend to show academic and social outcomes at least equal to, and often better than, those in segregated settings, while noting the methodological difficulty that placement is rarely random (Hehir et al., 2016; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). The World Report on Disability documents the aggregate association between educational exclusion and later economic exclusion (WHO & World Bank, 2011), which establishes the stakes of the mechanism without, by itself, establishing the superiority of any particular placement.

Extension of Social Networks

The third mechanism is relational: schooling together seeds social networks, friendships, acquaintanceships, weak ties, that segregated schooling forecloses, and such networks carry information, opportunity, and belonging into adult life. This mechanism is conceptually persuasive and observationally grounded in the school years, where reviews of social participation find both genuine friendships and persistent risks of isolation within nominally inclusive settings (Koster et al., 2009); its adult-life continuation is, again, more assumed than demonstrated, and the within-school evidence itself cautions that physical presence does not guarantee social participation.

A Theoretically Grounded Institutional Mechanism: Normative Modelling by Public Institutions

The fourth mechanism operates at the level of institutions rather than individuals. Schools are among the most widespread public institutions through which children first encounter formal social organisation; how they organise difference teaches, tacitly but pervasively, what the polity regards as normal. A system that educates children with disabilities apart communicates that separation is the natural response to difference; a system that educates them together communicates the opposite. The epistemic status of this mechanism should be stated plainly: it is theoretically grounded rather than empirically established, essentially constitutive rather than causal, the social-model insight institutionalised, and its evidence base is correspondingly interpretive: comparative scholarship documents that system-level commitments shape public meanings of disability (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020), but the mechanism does not lend itself to experimental test.

Intergenerational Transmission

The fifth mechanism extends the first across generations: adults schooled inclusively may, as parents, employers, officials, and teachers, reproduce inclusive dispositions in the next generation. It is the most speculative of the five, an important hypothesis embedded within the policy claim, for which longitudinal evidence is presently lacking.

The five mechanisms do not share a common epistemic status, and the review that follows treats them accordingly: mechanisms one and two enjoy partial empirical support at their proximal ends; mechanism three rests on conceptual argument and within-school observational evidence; mechanism four is primarily theoretical and interpretive; and mechanism five is speculative. Making this hierarchy explicit is itself a contribution, for the policy claim as commonly asserted treats the mechanisms as though they were equally established.

4. What the Evidence Does and Does Not Show ? :

Arranged along the proposed pathway, the evidence exhibits a consistent gradient: strongest at the proximal end, thinnest at the distal end.



At the proximal end, three bodies of evidence are reasonably secure. First, learners with disabilities in inclusive settings achieve academic and social outcomes that are, on the balance of the synthesised evidence, at least comparable to and frequently better than those achieved in segregated settings, with the caveat that selection into placement complicates causal attribution (Hehir et al., 2016; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Second, the presence of learners with disabilities is not, on average, associated with detriment to the achievement of their peers without disabilities: the meta-analysis of Szumski et al. (2017), covering forty-seven studies and more than four million students, found a small positive association between inclusive classroom composition and the achievement of students without special educational needs. This finding matters societally as well as educationally, because fear of harm to non-disabled learners is a principal source of resistance to inclusion. Third, structured cooperative contact within schools is associated with more favourable peer attitudes towards disability (de Boer et al., 2012), consistent with the wider contact literature (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

At the distal end, the evidence thins markedly. Longitudinal studies tracking inclusively schooled cohorts into adult attitudes, employment of and by persons with disabilities, social network composition, and civic behaviour are scarce internationally and, to the author's knowledge, largely absent for India. The honest summary is therefore not that the society-building claim is false, but that it is an extrapolation: well grounded in theory, consistent with proximal evidence, and unverified at the societal scale at which it is asserted. Three implications follow. Policy should claim the proposition as a warranted expectation rather than an established fact; programme design should deliberately engineer the conditions, cooperative structure, equal status, institutional support, under which the proximal mechanisms are known to operate; and research investment should prioritise the longitudinal designs capable of testing the distal links of the pathway.

5. The Indian Context: Architecture and Gap

India has established a substantial statutory and policy architecture for inclusive education. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 recognises twenty-one disabilities, guarantees free education in an appropriate environment, and obliges educational institutions to provide inclusive education; the National Education Policy 2020 declares the full participation of children with disabilities a priority and endorses resource support, assistive provision, and teacher preparation to that end; and Samagra Shiksha operationalises entitlements through its inclusive-education component (Government of India, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020). The architecture, in other words, embeds a strong commitment to inclusive education as part of India's broader social-inclusion agenda.

The implementation literature, however, documents a persistent gap between architecture and classroom. Singal (2006, 2016) has traced how inclusive education entered India as an international concept subject to national reinterpretation, with enrolment gains outpacing transformations of pedagogy, attitudes, and school culture, so that presence has too often substituted for participation. The teacher-preparation system remains bifurcated between general and special education streams; the author's doctoral research similarly suggests that mainstream and special school teachers in India share a philosophical commitment to inclusion but diverge substantially in affective comfort and practical confidence, suggesting that the binding constraint is experiential and institutional rather than doctrinal. Read against the mechanism framework of Section 3, the Indian situation is one in which the placement precondition has increasingly been incorporated into policy and enrolment practice while the conditions that activate the mechanisms, inclusive pedagogy, structured cooperative contact, prepared and confident teachers, resourced schools, remain unevenly present. Where those conditions are absent, the proposed pathway may be interrupted at its earliest stages, and the statutory claim cannot mature into social fact.

6. Policy Pathways: Conditions for Activating the Education–Society Link

The analysis yields a framework of five conditions under which inclusive education can credibly function as an instrument of social inclusion. First, placement with pedagogy: enrolment must be accompanied by teaching that extends learning to all, in the sense of Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), which entails sustained investment in teacher preparation with a strong experiential component rather than doctrinal instruction alone. Second, engineered contact: cooperative, equal-status peer interaction of the kind contact theory specifies must be deliberately structured, through cooperative learning, peer-support arrangements, and inclusive co-curricular life, rather than left to proximity. Third, resourced accommodation: assistive provision, accessible infrastructure, and specialist support determine whether



presence becomes participation, and the risks associated with under-resourced implementation counsel against treating inclusion primarily as a cost-saving measure (WHO & World Bank, 2011). Fourth, cross-sector collaboration: the expertise concentrated in the special school sector should be systematically connected to mainstream settings through resource-teacher models, co-teaching, and school partnerships, so that the affective and practical confidence of the specialist cadre diffuses across the system. Fifth, measurement of what matters: systems should monitor participation, peer relations, and attitudes, not enrolment alone, and should commission the longitudinal cohort research capable of testing the distal links of the chain in the Indian context.

Stated as conditions, these are simultaneously a research agenda: each is an empirically testable claim about the conditions under which inclusive placement produces proximal and distal outcomes, conditions of pedagogy, contact structure, resourcing, collaboration, and measurement.

7. Conclusion

The proposition that inclusive education builds an inclusive society is neither a settled empirical fact nor an empty slogan. Examined carefully, it is a compressed causal claim whose proximal links, benefit to learners with disabilities without detriment to their peers, and improved peer attitudes under structured contact, enjoy reasonable empirical support, and whose distal links, persistence of attitudes into adulthood, network extension, institutional modelling, and intergenerational transmission, are theoretically motivated but empirically under-determined. The claim is best understood, and best defended, as conditional: inclusive education can build towards an inclusive society where placement is joined to inclusive pedagogy, engineered cooperative contact, adequate resourcing, cross-sector collaboration, and honest measurement. For India, whose statutory and policy architecture already embeds a strong commitment to inclusive education within a broader social-inclusion agenda, the task is to satisfy its conditions, and the research task, no less urgent, is to build the longitudinal evidence base on which the next generation of the claim can rest on demonstration rather than extrapolation.

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