

Original Article

Inclusive Education in Gujarat: A Study of Governance and Institutional Practices

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Abstract - In many parts of the world, inclusive infrastructural and techniques are deployed to address the issues of exclusion of students with disabilities in education. Its adoption in the Indian state systems of education, however, is progressively influenced by governmental administration, policy creation, and schools' individual needs. This research paper examines these inclusionary and access focused practice as the location influenced by state power, policy and execution. The area of study is the domain of public education in the state of Gujarat in India. The design of this study is qualitative-dominant mixed methods. It examines the conceptualization, design and regulation of inclusion-focused projects for physically disabled learners from a government perspective, based on the review of policy frameworks and the research methods of surveys and interviews. The paper discusses the role of eligibility requirements, distribution of funds, and administrative processes in determining access to assistive devices and digital learning instruments. It examines the possibility of discrimination based on class, gender and geographical location, including the voices of those managing the administrative aspects of the state-led technological and policy interventions. These results suggest that while inclusive policies have much potential in enhancing participation in education, inclusion is still dependent on a range of intersecting socio-economic factors. Who is supported, the definition of inclusion in social identity terms of the beneficiary and the significance of certain disabilities in the policy system are all determined by the real-time implementation of government policies.

Keywords - Inclusive Education, Disability, Education Policies, State Interventions, Institutional Practices.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is often presented as a goal that schools either achieve or fail to achieve based on perspectives, awareness, and resources. However, many public schools that are officially labeled as “inclusive” continue to show exclusion in many forms for students with disabilities (Shekhar 2025). Recent debates around the implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, in India show that while inclusion is strongly stated in policy, its effects inside classrooms remain uneven and unclear (Government of India 2016; Shekhar 2025).

This study examines inclusive education in public schools in India by focusing on how state authority operates through school systems and everyday acts (UNESCO 2020; UNICEF n.d.). The research is based on interviews with key decision-makers and stakeholders involved in inclusive education. This topic is important as a sociological problem because it shifts attention away from individual-level explanations and instead examines how institutional rules, monitoring systems, and administrative decisions shape how disability is treated in schools. Understanding inclusion from a governance perspective allows for a deeper examination of why exclusion persists even when inclusive policies exist.

To date, however, there has been insufficient research to explore how inclusive education is created at the school level through governance. While many of the studies in the literature attend to general policy commitments, resource limitations, teacher attitudes, or general implementation gaps, fewer focus on how state rules, monitoring systems, administrative decisions, and institutional routines influence the day-to-day experiences of disability in public schools. This means there is a lack of understanding about how inclusion can be present in policy yet absent, partial or exclusionary in practice.

The study aims to examine how government authorities define and institutionalize inclusive education, analyze how state oversight influences school norms and behavior towards disability, and assess how governance structures impact inclusion. It also aims to identify gaps between policy commitments and the translation of those commitments into the everyday experiences of students with disabilities. These objectives collectively help explain how inclusion is actively produced or weakened through routine state-led practices.

The paper begins with a review of existing literature on inclusive education, institutional power, and disability,



highlighting gaps in research on state enforcement and governance. This is followed by a methodology section outlining the qualitative, interview-based approach used in the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social and Logistical Challenges

Studies have consistently indicated that the obstacles students with disabilities encounter are not only access-related but are also embedded in daily school operations (Beratan 2012; Ng et al. 2015). In an ethnographic study of an inclusive high school in the United States, Beratan (2012) shows that exclusion is perpetuated through institutional practices, teacher expectations, and peer relationships, a process he describes as institutional ableism. This implies that policy-level inclusion does not necessarily result in meaningful participation.

Ng et al. (2015) demonstrate that support systems for children with disabilities often operate indirectly through documents, parents, and external professionals, which can create inefficiencies and shift responsibility from institutions onto families. These studies show that students may be physically present in classrooms without receiving regular or consistent support. In India, the scale and lack of resources exacerbate this problem, and students tend to rely on informal networks to obtain accommodations such as scribes. This makes access to education unpredictable, which strengthens inequality even when it is formally included. In the Indian context, Taneja-Johansson, Singal and Samson's (2023) study of rural government schools shows that increased enrolment of children with disabilities does not necessarily lead to meaningful inclusion. Their research found that while teachers recognised the value of education for children with disabilities, classroom practice remained shaped by deficit-oriented views, limited preparedness, and weak support structures. This reinforces the idea that exclusion operates through everyday school practices, not only through formal denial of access.

2.2. Global Implementation of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a widely accepted policy goal, yet its application remains uneven across education systems (Magnússon et al. 2019; Conn and Davis 2024). Magnússon et al. (2019) argue that inclusive education is shaped by broader policy agendas, including tensions between equity and performance-based educational priorities. Likewise, Conn and Davis (2024) argue that policy reforms may have a limited impact when practitioner beliefs and school cultures remain unchanged. This suggests that inclusion depends not only on formal structures but also on school culture, practitioner beliefs, and everyday implementation.

Kuyini (2025) goes further to highlight the absence of accountability systems in inclusive education, where there are minimal, clear measures to ensure that policies translate into

meaningful changes in student outcomes. Across these studies, a clear pattern emerges: inclusive education does not fail because of a lack of awareness or commitment to policy, but because education systems do not adequately match incentives, accountability, and classroom practices with inclusive objectives.

2.3. Government Policies in India

India has developed a strong policy and legal framework for inclusive education through the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the National Education Policy 2020, and the National Guidelines and Implementation Framework on Equitable and Inclusive Education (Government of India 2016; Ministry of Education 2020; Department of School Education and Literacy 2023). These documents emphasise equal access, non-discrimination, and reasonable accommodations, such as assistive technologies and support services, including scribes. They also promote the mainstreaming of students with disabilities.

Inclusive education interventions are also shown to be inadequate as policy recognition alone from the scoping review conducted by Gale et al. (2022) in India. The review identified that successful inclusion requires the engagement of school leaders and teachers, the training and resourcing of school leaders and teachers, and systems of monitoring and evaluation. This implies that the current situation of inclusive education in India is not just a legal promise, but questions also regarding the institutional support and accountability of schools in implementing policy into practice.

However, literature on policy implementation suggests that the effectiveness of such policies depends on institutional implementation. Research on policy implementation and street-level bureaucracy shows that teachers and administrators play a pivotal role in interpreting and implementing policies (Lipsky 1980; Oliveira and Peixoto 2021) and often modify policies to adapt to constraints such as lack of resources, training, or competing priorities. This results in inequities in support. This means that while the policies recognise the need for accommodations, they do not necessarily offer reliable systems. India appears to face less of a problem of policy intent and more of a problem of implementation, coordination, and accountability compared to some international systems where accountability and standardisation are stronger.

2.4. Gaps in Literature and Research Focus

There is significant evidence in the current literature to support the reasons why inclusive education systems are not working, at the policy, institutional culture and practice. Beratan (2012) points to the reproduction of exclusion in schools, and international research to the policy-practice gap. Advocacy and accountability research also reveals a lack of cohesion and effectiveness in support mechanisms. Far less is discussed, however, about the operation of specific academic

support, including its access, management, and reliability in the lived school.

Policies and research recognize the need for support systems, but few attempts are made to examine how students access support services, their reliability and points of failure. This leaves a gap between policy and student experience as inclusion can be present at the policy level but not in classroom work, exams and participation in daily school activities.

This research aims to explore the availability and reliability of academic support systems, including the availability of scribes, infrastructural support, and teacher readiness. It seeks to take the general discussion about inclusion beyond the level of understanding of what inclusive education is, and where it fails, by connecting the general systemic issues with the specific operational issues.

3. Method

The proposed study uses a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design grounded in an interpretivist approach (Creswell and Creswell 2018), which focuses on how people perceive and experience social realities rather than on quantifying predetermined outcomes. Here, inclusion is not considered a quantifiable measure but rather a product of institutional practices, policy interpretation, and daily school processes. The paper examines how formal policy structures are converted into practice in schools.

The study is based in Gujarat, particularly around Vadodara, because inclusive education is officially required in the state but not uniformly applied; thus, it is a suitable setting to examine discrepancies between policy and practice. The research involves five stakeholders, including a trustee and a principal from a school for visually impaired students, two general school principals, and one senior education professional engaged in government-level initiatives. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their direct involvement in education policy or school-level implementation (Palinkas et al. 2015). This was supported by snowball sampling, where initial contacts helped identify other relevant participants (Noy 2008).

The data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected participants, whereby an interview guide was used to ensure consistency with the interviews and to allow flexibility with the responses. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate for this study as it enabled information-rich cases to be selected for the study, relevant to the research focus, and the small sample size was deemed defensible in light of the logic of thematic saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al. 2006). All the participants and their affiliate institutions have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis

and conducted via audio call, taking about 15 to 20 minutes each. The audio files were stored on cloud storage with no real names or indicators. The interviews were conducted on major themes including: what is meant by inclusion, awareness of policies, implementation, resources available, and challenges in supporting students with disability. Secondary sources of data were also used to expand and contextualize findings, such as national and state policy documents, implementation frameworks, and government reports.

The data underwent thematic analysis, which involved identifying patterns and themes inductively rather than through pre-definition. This enabled themes such as institutional deficiencies, insufficient training, inadequate monitoring, and erratic support systems to arise directly from participant responses. Although the interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes, which limited the depth of follow-up possible within each interview, the focused semi-structured format allowed key areas relevant to the research question to be addressed consistently. Along with this, document analysis was used to examine the difference between how inclusion is discussed in policy and how it works in practice. The data collected from the interviews was further validated by the information from the reports and secondary sources through the process of data triangulation. Simple descriptive analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel to map the presence or absence of key features such as infrastructure, training, and monitoring mechanisms across documents, supporting comparison between policy claims and actual implementation.

The study involves potentially sensitive contexts, particularly in relation to students with disabilities. However, direct interaction with students was avoided, and the research focused on adult stakeholders to minimize risk. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and allowing participants to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants and institutions, using pseudonyms, and reporting only de-identified findings. Data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

A key limitation of the study is the small sample size of five interviews, which restricts the generalizability of findings. Additionally, the research is geographically limited to Gujarat, which may not fully represent conditions across India. Despite this, the study provides valuable insights into how inclusive education policies function in practice and highlights gaps between formal frameworks and their implementation at the institutional level.

4. Discussion

4.1. Inclusion as Welfare and Infrastructure Instead of Educational Participation

A common theme across the interviews was that inclusion is often framed through a welfare model, in which the state and educational institutions focus on access, safety, and

financial assistance rather than educational participation. Interviewees consistently cited ramps, hygiene facilities, medical check-ups, uniforms, subsidies and transport assistance as key markers of inclusion. Although these provisions are important, they reflect a limited view of inclusion that prioritizes access to education over participation in learning. This framing connects to institutional ableism, where educational systems appear inclusive through visible forms of support while deeper barriers to classroom participation, curriculum access, and academic agency remain unaddressed.

A trustee from a school for the visually impaired reflected this concern, stating that

“There are guidelines, such as ramp support and accessibility support, to move around. Only then can these students study in mainstream schools. More than education, the government has paid attention to hygiene, safety, and financial support, and not educational facilities as much.”

This supports the view that inclusion is being interpreted primarily in terms of access, safety, and well-being rather than classroom engagement.

Another trustee from a school for the visually impaired echoed this concern. The trustee explained that government

programmes prioritise infrastructure and safety but place less emphasis on classroom learning and academic support. Likewise, a mainstream school principal from a low-income community defined inclusion through financial assistance, school subsidies, uniforms and textbooks, highlighting inclusion as a welfare provision.

The mainstream school principal from a low-income community explained this by stating that, “There are special facilities provided, medical checks are made, and arrangements are made accordingly... The student is also financially supported for their education, and schools are also subsidized for supporting these students. They provide uniforms, books, and money for education, too.”

This statement suggests that inclusion is understood as a bundle of services and resources. This is part of a policy trend where disability inclusion is reduced to physical access and visible measures like ramps, assistive technology, and subsidies because these are easier for governments to measure and showcase. Yet educational issues such as curriculum, classroom engagement, accessible assessment, and pedagogic change are less addressed. This finding connects directly to the study’s aim of examining how government authorities define and institutionalize inclusive education, as the interview data suggest that inclusion is being institutionally defined through measurable welfare and access provisions rather than through deeper classroom participation.

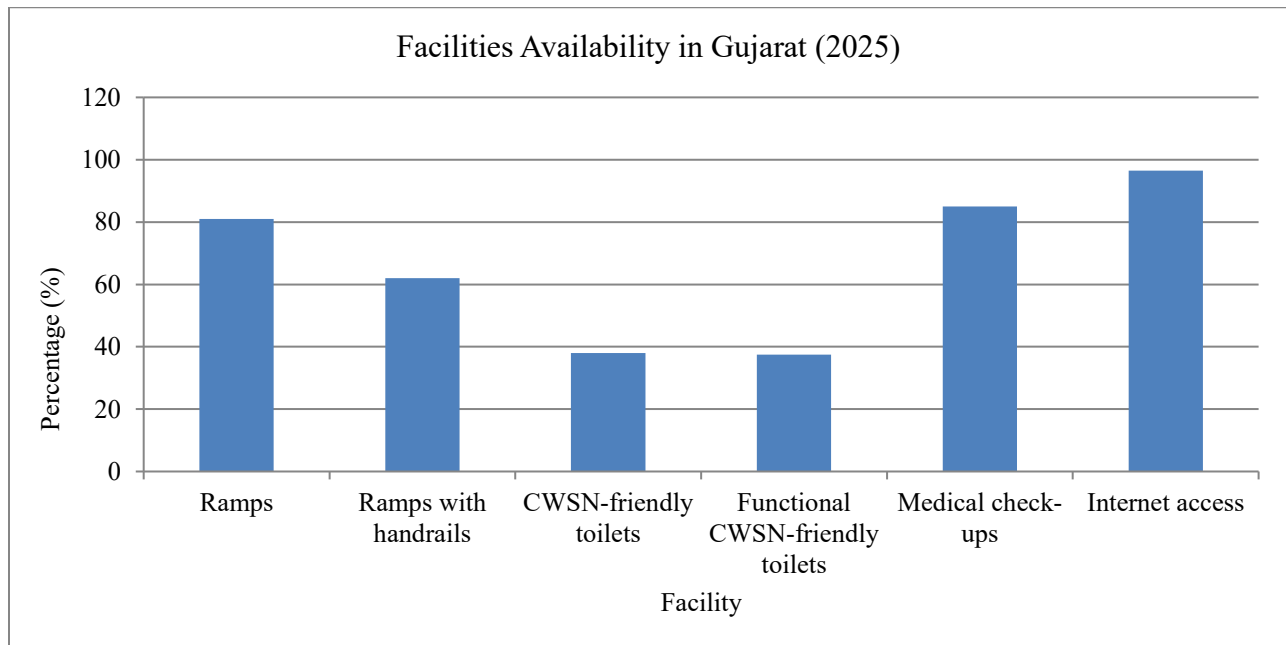


Fig. 1 Facilities Available in Public Schools in Gujarat (2025)

These arguments are supported by the secondary data. UDISE+ 2024–25 data show that 81.1% of schools in Gujarat had ramps, but only 38.2% had CWSN-friendly toilets, and only 37.4% had functional CWSN-friendly toilets. Gujarat

also had 85.1% of schools conducting medical check-ups and 96.5% with internet access. This implies that related welfare indicators like medical check-ups and internet access are better than disability-specific access and participation

indicators. This supports the conclusion that inclusion has progressed more clearly in infrastructure and welfare services than in educational participation. These results indicate that inclusion is often equated with access but not participation [refer to Figure I]. This information addresses one of the core objectives of research around holistic inclusion by highlighting that the presence of facilities does not translate to inclusion of disabled students into mainstream schools.

4.2. The Contradictions of Inclusive Schooling: Separation, Special Categories and Delayed Mainstreaming

A second theme was the tension between the discourse of inclusion and the persistence of separate educational settings. Participants explained that students with disabilities are included in some ways but are institutionally separated from other students. A trustee of a school for visually impaired students explained this paradox by saying,

“Although inclusive doesn't mean actually inclusive... There are always different sections or categories for special students. In a way, it is inclusive that the students are being included in activities previously only done by sighted students, but it is also exclusive as they are not competing with the general public.”

This demonstrates that inclusion may be present at the level of participation but still reproduces segregation through categories. The interviewee further described how, while students may be able to participate in activities they were previously unable to, they may be competing in different categories to students without disabilities. This shows a form of symbolic inclusion where students are included but not equally.

Likewise, the principal of a school for visually impaired students suggested schools should be more open to accepting sighted students and students with other types of disabilities. This reflects a more inclusive approach to schooling, where students with different abilities are taught together rather than separated into different institutions. He explained this by saying,

“We believe inclusion means for visually impaired students to study alongside sighted students... We are classified as a school for the visually impaired, but we should be given the freedom to admit sighted students and also students with other disabilities... this way education will truly be inclusive.”

This quote reinforces the notion that inclusion is about mixed learning environments, not categories.

The abovementioned argument around exclusion also reflects in the statistical data, which is discussed in the previous paragraph and Figure 1. In Gujarat, 95.0% of government schools had ramps, while 52.3% of private

unaided schools had ramps. Ramps with handrails were present in 77.7% of government schools but only 30.4% of private unaided schools. Likewise, 47.3% of government schools had CWSN-friendly toilets, while 21.3% of private unaided schools did.

This reveals that even basic accessibility is not the same across different types of schools and that inclusive schooling is not equally accessible. This suggests that education systems may continue to reproduce segregation under the language of inclusion, limiting meaningful interaction between students with and without disabilities.

The result is linked directly with the study goal of understanding the role of governance structures in inclusion, and their findings from interviews and statistical data show that institutional types, separate school types, and unequal accessibility can lead to segregation, even when the system is deemed inclusive.

4.3. Weak Implementation and Inconsistent Accountability on the Ground

Another significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the disconnect between policy and practice. Many interviewees reported that inclusive education policies are in place but not monitored. A senior education professional involved in government-linked education initiatives stated, “Yes, this system does exist, but it is only on paper. No real checks are conducted. We can tell that there is no actual implementation.” His statement directly supports the claim of weak monitoring and the gap between official policy and school-level practice. Another youth advisory leader working on education projects in Gujarat suggested that many policies on inclusion are only on paper, with little enforcement and accountability for implementation.

This view was counterbalanced by a school principal from a mainstream school in a low-income neighbourhood who reported high levels of government engagement through welfare inspections, home visits and institutional monitoring for students with disabilities. The principal stated,

“No, the government provides full facilities... they even check how things are at home to make sure the student is well supported. They are highly trained and involved in the students’ welfare. There is a deep level of support provided.”

This contrasting view is important because it shows that implementation is not experienced in the same way across institutions. This paradox highlights the variability in implementation across schools. Some schools may have weak enforcement, while others have strong support. This indicates that the outcomes of inclusive education are often determined by uneven governance arrangements rather than consistent policy implementation.

This paradox is supported by secondary data. There is a fairly elaborate policy framework, at the national level, which includes the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), Samagra Shiksha and the National Guidelines and Implementation Framework on Equitable and Inclusive Education. But the implementation signals vary. As is seen nationwide, 79.1% of the schools had ramps, 54.9% of schools had ramps with handrails, 35.6% of schools had CWSN-friendly toilets, while 33.4% of the schools had functional CWSN-friendly toilets. As per these national figures, Gujarat gets ranks relatively good when it comes to the availability of infrastructure. The picture, however, is more mixed with regard to the implementation and use of such facilities, as is revealed in the analysis of this paper. It means that inclusive education is not just about the presence of policies, it is the policies that are guided, monitored and translated into day-to-day practice in the institution.

4.4. Lack of Awareness, Training, and Institutional Readiness as Key Barriers to Meaningful Inclusion

The other major concept that this paper examines is the under-preparedness of mainstream schools for students with disabilities. A trustee of a school for visually impaired children highlighted the difference between planning and the implementation of inclusive education in the schools,

“There is a huge mismatch between government planning and ground-level implementation of such planning, due to a lack of awareness of the individuals. Disabled students should be studying with sighted students from the beginning, and provision should be made for special education teachers in all schools, and it is not only policy but also awareness, training and institutional preparation that are essential for inclusion.”

This highlights that this is not just a policy problem, it is one of the readiness of schools. The focus in teacher awareness, special educators and early integration implies that there is a need for more institutional capacity in mainstream schools before they can meaningfully include students with disabilities.

Likewise, the principal of a school for visually impaired students noted that mainstream schools are reluctant to accept students with disabilities because they are not prepared and aware. The principal stated,

“There is a large lack of awareness... many mainstream schools aren’t ready to take in special education students like ours, so there should be more quotas in those schools to accommodate visually impaired students.”

This highlights that the barrier is not only infrastructure, but also the reluctance and unreadiness of mainstream schools. These insights suggest that while policies may be in place, schools may not have the training, staffing and culture to support inclusion. Teacher readiness and awareness are key challenges.

This is supported by secondary data. According to Gujarat's Project Approval Board data, teacher training in inclusive education is a problem--because of the training of just 16.53% teachers. The same data depicted a total of 2,012 special educators with Samagra Shiksha, and a Rajya Sabha reply revealed that there was just 2,077 schools in Gujarat where a special educator was present in 2024–25. This implies there were only 3.9% special educator schools in Gujarat, with 53,355 schools. This reiterates what was heard in the interviews, that mainstream schools are not staffed and ready to include.

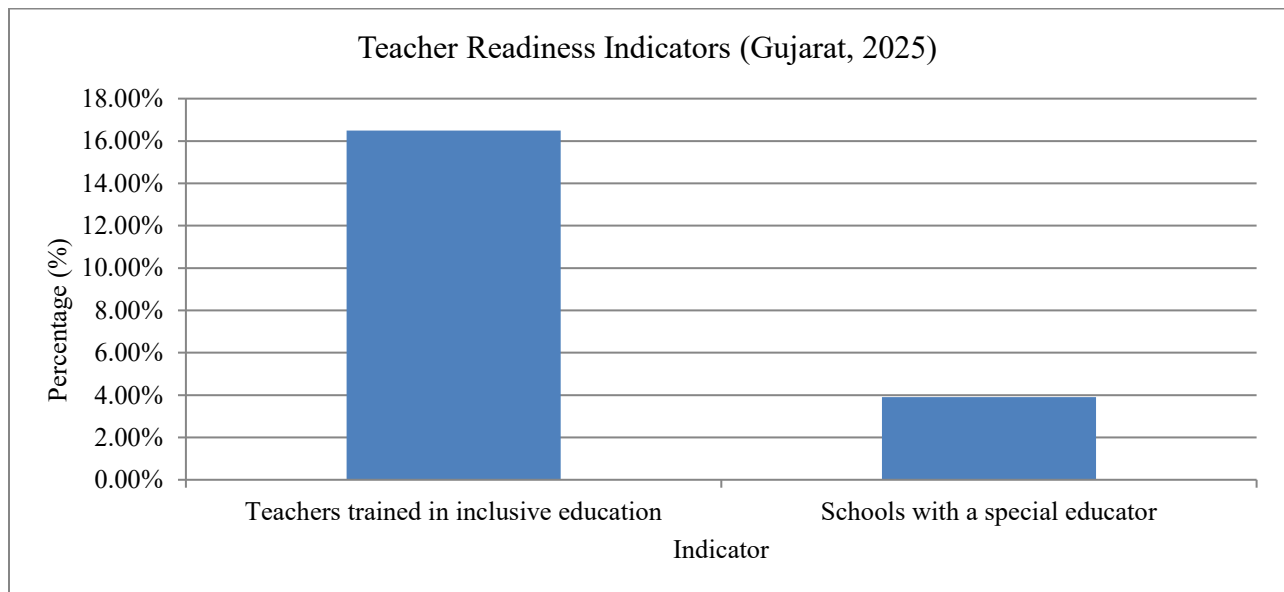


Fig. 2 Teacher Readiness Indicators (Gujarat 2025)

5. Conclusion

The issue of inclusive education in Gujarat cannot be reduced to one of the existence or otherwise of formal policies. What is more important, as evidenced in this study, is the meaning of “inclusion” in terms of its definition, implementation, and application in daily school life. In the interview data and secondary sources, it seems that lack of legal commitment is less important, and the unevenness of the transfer of policy into institutional capacity is more important. There is a visible system of access in place in the form of ramps, welfare support, subsidy, medical checks and assistive provisions, but this does not necessarily lead to meaningful educational participation of students with disabilities.

The results indicate that inclusion is often understood through a welfare- and infrastructure-based model rather than one that is based on transforming classroom-based learning, assessment, pedagogy, and peer participation. They also highlight an enduring conundrum of inclusive education: students with disability are formally included in the education system but are segregated in special categories, in separate institutional arrangements, and are delayed mainstreaming. It is particularly significant that both principals are saying that inclusion is “only on paper” and also that “full facilities” are available, as this highlights the fact that the situation is not the same across institutions. This is directly related to Lipsky's (1980) definition of street-level bureaucracy, in which principals, teachers, and other local administrators apply policy at the ground level, resulting in variable implementation that varies from school to school. Weak monitoring, inconsistent accountability, lack of teacher training, and lack of access to special educators are also identified as obstacles to meaningful inclusion in the research. Together, these findings suggest that exclusion isn't just an outcome of personal bias or lack of resources, but an institutional habit of mind that shapes the school's approach to disability.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by moving the emphasis away from inclusion as an idealistic policy to inclusion as a guided practice. Rather than being a dichotomy, inclusive education is best understood as the interaction of state apparatus, school culture, administrative decision-making, and the unequal ways it is enacted, which create partial inclusion. In India, the law and policies are quite developed, but the effectiveness of classroom training is not guaranteed. This study, therefore, helps in the debate about institutional ableism, policy enactments, street-level bureaucracy and educational governance by showing that the

effectiveness of inclusive education is linked more closely to the organization of the daily practice of the systems that enable the realization of its rights than to the legislative inclusion of the right itself.

This research project was done at high school level, which involved time, access and sampling limitations. This study could not be based on extended “participant observation” in schools, due to constraints of five interviews of stakeholders, mostly in the regions of Gujarat and close to Vadodara. For this reason, the study cannot be considered to be a representative one of the experiences of all the disabled students in Gujarat or in India. The restrictions are not a hindrance to the results being useful, however. The information is directly relevant to the research purpose as it helped identify the meaning of inclusion for the institutional actors, meaning of policy at the school level, where there was a disconnect between the formal policy and reality.

Future Research: Need to widen up to 15-20 districts in Gujarat, and questions should also be widened to include more stakeholders like Students with Disabilities, Parents, Special Teachers, Mainstream Teachers and Civil society organisations-DLOs. The data is limited and proves to be poor in respect of provision being made for learners with disabilities across Gujarat, given this narrow focus. This information could also be used to start a legal and policy process, such as a PIL case, to see if a more public record and accountability for the current disability-education situation in the area may be created. This paper's commentary is that the existence of a policy doesn't necessarily indicate inclusive education, it is more significant when there is a degree of feasibility of participation, and dignity and learning are significant for students with disabilities.

Author Contribution Statement

The author, Zeus, came up with the research question and study design. He conducted a survey of relevant literature, collected primary data through semi-structured interviews, and performed thematic analysis of the data. The author also analyzed secondary data sources, including policy documents, public and civil society reports. Zeus has written this manuscript in its entirety.

Conflicts of Interest

The author, Zeus Lalani, declares that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the research, findings, or conclusions presented in this paper.

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