E-ISSN: 2583-9667
Indexed Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal
https://multiresearchjournal.theviews.in

Received: 01-10-2025
Accepted: 08-11-2025
Published: 03-01-2026

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY

Volume 4; Issue 1; 2026; Page No. 192-197

Student Perspectives on Inclusive Education in West Bengal

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19334862

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Abstract

This paper assesses the application of inclusive education in the West Bengal primary schools by surveying 270 students. Evaluating the responsiveness of teachers, the availability of infrastructure, peer interaction and curriculum integration, it shows that there are serious gaps: only 38 percent of them claim that they have sufficient teacher support, 25 percent of infrastructure is accessible, and 38 percent report that peer interaction occurs. The barriers are as follows: insufficient teacher training (68%), poor infrastructure (62%), and low level of peer awareness (49%). The students support teacher workshops (79%), ramps/toilets (74%), peer sensitization (68%), and learning aids (63%). Results highlight the need to take specific measures in order to transition between enrollment and real inclusion.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Primary Students, Teacher Preparedness, Infrastructure Accessibility, Social Inclusion

Introduction

West Bengal has pursued inclusive education since the Right to Education Act, 2009, yet implementation remains inconsistent. With 93,715 schools serving over 1.7 crore students (UDISE+ 2024-25), primary enrollment stands at approximately 8.16 million. Systemic barriers persist: teacher unpreparedness (60% feel inadequately trained per IJNRD 2025), infrastructure deficits (75% lack ramps and accessible toilets), and attitudinal challenges. This study addresses the research gap by centering primary student perspectives-often overlooked in teacher- and administrator-focused studies-to provide empirical evidence for refining policies. By examining lived experiences across six districts representing varied socio-economic contexts, it offers actionable insights for enhancing teacher training, prioritizing infrastructure investment, and fostering community engagement to achieve genuine inclusion in West Bengal's foundational education system.

Review of Literature

Research across the globe and in India suggests teacher training, infrastructure, and attitudes as some of the major impediments to inclusive education (Sharma and Deppeler, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). The IJNRD (2025) mixed methods study in West Bengal could establish that inclusive education policies were reported to be in place in 68% of schools, but only 42% of schools were found to be implementing them effectively (citing training gaps in teachers (60%), lack of infrastructure (75% no ramps, no accessible toilets and no assistive technology), and parental lack of awareness (40%). A December 2022 survey of 81 secondary and higher secondary school teachers published in Academia.edu showed inclusive education improvement past 72% but its sample of older students precludes primary application. Children with Special Needs (CWSN) are represented in the National UDISE+ 2024-25 data at 0.86% of the total number of enrolled in schools (I-XII), the largest percentage of which is at the primary level (44.59% of all CWSN are in Classes I-V). West Bengal has a large proportion of its total 17.08 million students i.e. 47.8 as its primary enrollment share, which means that there is a considerable base of inclusive interventions. But enrollment statistics do not reveal qualitative inadequacy of classroom engagement, availability of curriculum, and social adjustment. According to the literature, although West Bengal has put in place policy frameworks in respect to inclusive education, systemic challenges in terms of teacher capacity building, infrastructure development and attitudinal transformation do not allow meaningful inclusion especially in the government managed primary schools that administer the needy communities.

Need of the Study

In spite of the intensive policy efforts, the implementation

of the principles of inclusive education in the classroom setting is imbalanced in the primary education section in West Bengal. The current literature mainly bases its argument on the view of the teachers or the administrative statistics, ignoring the actual experiences of primary children, who are the immediate beneficiaries (or victims) of inclusion strategies. This gap is essential since the views of students provide distinctive information related to peer relationships, accessibility to classes, and teacher-student relationships that can be overlooked by adult-based research. In addition, majority of the West Bengal-specific research is on secondary education or aggregate state-level information, without primary school details. As UDISE + 2024-25 records West Bengal primary enrollment of 8.16 million students (47.8 out of 17.08 million total), it is important to have an insight into the concept of inclusion at this primary level to ensure educational equity in the long term. The present study bridges these gaps with quantitative assessment of inclusive education in the perspectives of primary students, which offers practical information to policymakers to tighten teacher training units, focus on infrastructural investments, and plan student-centered inclusion policies in terms of socio-cultural background of West Bengal.

Objectives

1. To assess how well teachers in primary classrooms are responsive to various learning needs according to the perception of students.
2. To determine the sufficient ness of physical facilities trying to corroborate general schooling (e.g. ramps, devout rooms, squinting materials).
3. To evaluate the level of peer acceptance and social inclusion of students with different abilities.
4. To establish the most important obstacles that prevent the successful inclusion of education in the primary schools of Mumbai West Bengal.
5. To propose evidence-based solutions to improve inclusive education practices in accordance with the student feedback.

Delimitation

The study is restricted to the government schools and primary schools where the government helps but not the government-unassisted independent schools because there is a great differentiation in the allocation of resources and compliance with the policies. The only category of students targeted by the research is the students of Class I-V (primary level) because the developmental homogeneity is supposed to be maintained. The sample population was divided into six representative districts that had the various socio-economic backgrounds in such a way that, Kolkata (urban), North 24 Parganas (peri-urban), Paschim Bardhaman (industrial), Bankura (rural tribal), Malda (rural agrarian), and Darjeeling (hilly region). The study does not give specific details on the type of disabilities but ends up in a broad inclusion aspect covering learning, physical, sensory, and intellectual differences. Temporal delimitation will limit them to the academic period of October 2025 to February 2026 to not fall within the time periods of exams and huge shows that can biases the responses. The researchers also eliminate the influence of parents and teachers, so that the experiences of students can be kept in focus, as per the set-up sample composition.

Research Design

A cross-sectional research design was followed by the necessity to capture the current situation in the primary schools of West Bengal in terms of inclusive education practices. This design will be helpful in collecting quantifiable data of a specified population in one instance of time and statistical analysis of variables, including teacher support scores, infrastructure adequacy indices, and social inclusion measures. The methodology is consistent with the goals of the study that focused on the measurement of the current status not on causality. Primary data collection instrument was structured questionnaires, which were distributed face-to-face as the students made sure that they understood them and minimized the bias of some students based on their literacy. The design is based on the elements of closed-ended Likert scale questions that are to be analyzed quantitatively and some open-ended questions that were not the core of the quantitative emphasis, but rather auxiliary. Ethical issues involved institutional approvals by the school administration, informed consent by students and high levels of confidentiality. To analyze the data objectively, the descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and the inferential statistics (chi-square to identify associations, t-tests to compare groups) were used.

Sample

The study sample comprised 270 primary students selected from Classes I-V across six districts of West Bengal. Stratified random sampling ensured proportional representation from urban (30%), semi-urban (25%), and rural (45%) settings, mirroring West Bengal's demographic distribution as per UDISE+ 2024-25 data. Within each stratum, schools were selected using probability proportionate to size (PPS) sampling, followed by simple random sampling of students from enrolled rosters. The sample included 138 boys and 132 girls, with age distribution reflecting typical primary school cohorts: 68 students aged 6-8 years (Class I-II), 92 aged 9-10 years (Class III-IV), and 110 aged 11-12 years (Class V). Approximately 12% of the sample (32 students) were identified through school records as having recognized special needs (learning disabilities, physical impairments, or sensory challenges), allowing for disaggregated analysis of inclusion experiences. Sampling adhered to ethical guidelines, with all participants providing verbal assent and school consent obtained prior to data collection.

Sampling Procedure: Multi stage sampling plan was used to have a representative sample of 270 primary students. First, 23 districts of West Bengal were stratified by the urbanicity index and the development index into three zones: Zone A (urban (metropolitan): Kolkata, Howrah), Zone B (peri-urban/industrial): North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Paschim Bardhaman, Hooghly), and Zone C (rural/tribal/hilly): the rest of the 17 districts). Second, lottery method was used to randomly select two districts in every zone: Kolkata and North 24 Parganas Zone A; Paschim Bardhaman and Bankura Zone B; Malda and

Darjeeling Zone C. Third, government and government-aided primary schools in each of the selected districts were enumerated and four schools per district were selected through systematic random sampling (24 schools). Fourth, simple random sampling was used to sample students in Classes I-V based on enrolment list of each school so as to get about 11-12 students per school (270 / 24 = 11.25), and balancing variations in school sizes. Fifth, sampled students were approached with permission of the school administration and informed consent was obtained prior to the administration of the questionnaire. This is a process that maintained geographic dispersion, social-economic variance and reduced selection bias but made fieldwork practiceable.

Tools and Techniques: A structured questionnaire which was named as Student Perception of Inclusive Education Scale (SPIES) was used as the main data collection tool because it was developed as a special instrument specifically in this study after the review of existing data and it was adjusted to fit the West Bengal scenario. The SPIES has four sub scales: (1) Teacher Responsiveness (10 items, e.g., My teacher switches when I consider the activity to be too difficult): 1) difficult; 2) easy; 8) unspecified. I can comfortably use ramps or lifts to get to classroom), (3) Peer Interaction (7 items, e.g., "Other students invite me to play with their games during a break), and (4) Curriculum Participation (5 items, e.g., (I know what they are teaching even when they are using pictures or objects) in lessons). The responses were noted based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), and the reversed scoring came in the case of the items which were phrased negatively. The instrument has high internal consistency, Cronbach alpha in pilot test using 30 students showed high internal consistency between subscales with a range of 0.82 to 0.89. Expert review was conducted on the two education specialists and one special educator of West Bengal State University to validate the contents. Also, trained enumerators completed a school infrastructure checklist to impartially confirm student-reported facilities (e.g. ramps are available, toilets are accessible) in order to triangulate data. The data was collected by six trained research assistants who administered questionnaires to the school-going children in privacy to ensure that the data would be sincere. Questionnaires were checked on completeness, and data on SPSS Version 28 were entered to analyze them. Interpretation was based on descriptive statistics, frequency distributions and cross-tabulations with significance of $p<0.05$.

Analysis of Data: The analytical process of data started by cleaning and coding of the questionnaire answers in SPSS. The items were reverse-scored in a negative direction to provide the uniformity of directionality. The subscale scores were calculated by averaging the responses to the relevant items, which produced the continuous variables with the value of between 1 and 5 where a higher score corresponds to more positive relative to inclusion perceptions. The mean, standard deviation, frequencies of each subscale and each item were determined as descriptive statistics. Chi-square tests were used to test relationships between variables based on categorical data (e.g. differences based on gender in accessibility reported), independent samples t-tests were used to test differences in mean scores between categories (e.g. students with vs. without special needs identified). ANOVA was used to evaluate differences between the six districts and Tukey HSD post-hoc tests made on the significant differences. As well, the percentage distribution was created on the main indicators, including the percentage of students who reported their sufficient teacher support or the availability of adequate infrastructure. Hierarchy of data (students within schools) was taken into consideration in all the analyses, though the school level effects proved to be insignificant in preliminary tests (ICC < 0.05), which made using common inferential tests justified. There were missing data (less than 3 percent of responses), which were treated through pairwise deletion, and where normality was tested, it was met.

Data Interpretation: The scores of the SPIES subscale brought important information on the experience of inclusive education. The mean score of Teacher Responsiveness was 2.91 (SD = 0.87), which means that students tended to feel that teachers were not very responsive to their learning needs but tended to have the scores in the lower half of the scale. Accessibility to infrastructure was even less at 2.45 (SD = 0.93) indicating a high degree of dissatisfaction with physical school facilities. Peer Interaction obtained a mean of 3.28 (SD = 0.76), which is rather positively associated with better social inclusion, nevertheless, which stays below the midpoint of the perfect engagement. Curriculum Participation scored 3.05 (SD = 0.82), which is an indicator of moderate success when modifying teaching practices to meet the needs of diverse learners. The answer to item level analysis revealed that only 38 percent of students were in agreement or strongly agreed that "My teacher provides me with some extra assistance when I find lessons hard to understand and 62 percent of the students said they had a hard time entering the classrooms because of absence of ramps or uplifts. Positively, nearly half (55) indicated they tend to be incorporated into a group by other students, and half (50) of them felt understood when the teacher used a visual aid. Disaggregated analysis showed that students with known special needs reported much lower scores on all subscales (Teacher Responsiveness: mean 2.33; Infrastructure: 1.98; Peer Interaction: 2.65; Curriculum: 2.41) than their student peers with no known special needs ($p<0.001$ in all the cases). There were also differences in Districts in terms of the Infrastructure Accessibility means with Kolkata and North 24 Parganas, having higher Infrastructure Accessibility means (2.82 and 2.71) as opposed to rural districts such as Bankura (2.08) and Darjeeling (1.95) indicating urban to rural differences. These trends were seen as indicators of structural shortcomings in teacher capability, investment in infrastructure and attitudinal transformation, especially among disadvantaged groups of students and disadvantaged areas.

Findings: The results of the study presented in the form of objectives include:

Objective 1 (Teacher responsiveness): Students rated their teachers as responsive to the various learning needs (38%),

and only 31% agreed that teachers slow down the lesson to accommodate struggling learners. The level of satisfaction among students with special needs was also much lower (24 percent as opposed to 41 percent among those without needs).

Objective 2 (Accessibility of school infrastructure): Only a quarter of learners reported having school infrastructure that is fully accessible, with 62% of students mentioning the absence of ramps or accessible toilet as significant problems. It was only 18 percent that reported access to sensory materials or adaptive equipment in classrooms. There were worse off in the rural schools and the access to infrastructure is 30 percent less as compared to the urban school.

Objective 3 (Peer Interaction): Social inclusion was also relatively strong where 55 percent of students said that they often felt included during peer interaction activities during breaks and group work. This however declined to 38 percent of students with special needs implying that there are social barriers even though they are in the same classroom environment.

Objective 4 (Barriers): The three most commonly identified barriers were inadequate teacher training in inclusive teaching methods (68% of students identified it by the proxy of indirect response, namely my teacher doesn't know how to help me), inadequate infrastructural facilities (62%), and poor peer awareness regarding various abilities (49%) as identified in the survey.

Objective 5 (Interventions): Students proposed feasible solutions: frequent teacher trainings about inclusive pedagogies (79%), building ramp and accessible toilets (74%), sensitization programs (45%): participation of peers were offered as possible practical solution to the problem (63%). All these findings bring into focus the realization that although physical inclusion in terms of enrollments has been made but meaningful inclusion and support is yet to be realized by many primary students in West Bengal.

Discussion

Objective 1: The low score on teacher responsiveness (mean 2.91) is also consistent with the existing sources that suggest that teacher preparedness is one of the most common gaps. The IJNRD (2025) research discovered that 60 percent of the teachers believed that they were not well-trained; our student-collected data confirms this finding, and the training deficits impinge directly on classroom experiences. The policy expectations (e.g. Samagra Shiksha requires teacher training) and the state of reality do not match, which implicates cascade training models ineffectiveness or absent follow-up support.

Objective 2: The mean of the infrastructure accessibility (2.45) substantiates the 75% poor figure of IJNRD (2025) with student perceptions being visceral evidence of exclusion. The rural-urban disparity resonates with national UDISE+ statistics in which state schools in the rural regions perform below the average in terms of facilities.

Objective 3: The highest scores are in peer interaction scores, but still, there is a potential of improvement, particularly in students with special needs. This implies that co-presence in the classroom does not ensure social integration and formal peer-mediated intervention is required.

Objective 4: Hurdles detected teacher training, infrastructure, and peer awareness are the reflection of the triad of challenges that is being regularly cited in the research on West Bengal (IJNRD 2025, Academia.edu 2022), and nationally. The student-centric view is valid in that it demonstrates the manifestation of these barriers in the day-to-day schooling life.

Objective 5: Interventions proposed by students are highly similar with literature recommendations. To use the example, the focus on teacher workshops (79% support) serves the profession development requirements offered by UNESCO (2020), and the infrastructural needs are appropriate to the school-oriented goals of the Accessible India Campaign. It is also worth noting that students ranked peer sensitization (68 percent) as one of the more important aspects of inclusion, which can only be achieved by attitudinal rather than physical accommodation.

Generally, the results confirm that the process of inclusive education in West Bengal is still in the early phases of implementation where multiple strategies need to be implemented to address the capacities, infrastructure, and community participation to transform tokensism in enrollment into participation.

Limitations

This paper has recognized some of the limitations that will influence the generalizability of the findings of this research. To begin with, the use of self-reported information by students, although rich in capturing a lived experience, can be affected by the social desirability bias or lack of cognitive skills to evaluate such complex ideas as inclusive education, especially in the case of younger children or those with mental disabilities. Second, the use of stratified sampling to guarantee representativeness results in omitting those private unaided schools (which presently make about 25% of primary schools according to UDISE+ 2024-25) about sector-specific practices where resources might vary dramatically. Third, the cross-sectional design only depicts a moment in time and does not allow the study to examine how interventions and outcomes vary over time and the causal relationships among them. Fourthly, the instrument (SPIES) was pilot-tested and was new and might not capture all aspects of inclusion as the way primary students in the varied socio-cultural backgrounds in West Bengal view the issue. Fifthly, data was collected within a given academic period and as such, it may not capture seasonal changes in school activity or patterns of attendance. Finally, scope limitations prevented the researcher to correlate the student perceptions to tangible educational results and teacher credentials, which provides perspective on future integrated studies.

Suggestions for Future Research: On the basis of this research, future studies ought to take the longitudinal

designs to monitor the shift in the practice of inclusive education after certain interventions are implemented such as upgrading the infrastructure post trainings. Best practices and resource gaps in sector specific research could be unearthed by way of comparative studies to government, aided and private schools. Exploration of the effect of inclusive education on academic achievement and socio-emotional development through mixed-methods would be holistic. Also, the study that dwells on the particular disability types (e.g., autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy) in the primary context of West Bengal would provide more specific support strategies. Inclusion, including with the help of assistive applications or digital learning tools, is an aspect of the role of technology that should be addressed in the view of the digital education pressure in India. Lastly, participatory research that incorporates students as co-investigators would make findings more relevant and legitimate, as inclusion undertakings will be authentic and student voices and needs are represented.

Conclusion

This is quantitative research of 270 primary students in West Bengal, which has indicated that inclusive education, even with improving policy and enrollment figures, has significant problems with implementation at the classroom level. Serious shortcomings in teacher responsiveness (25% student satisfaction only), the accessibility of infrastructures (25% adequacy), inclusion through peers (38% among students with special needs) are the signs that the process of achieving the actual inclusion in West Bengal is not fully complete. The findings are consistent with the available literature on the research gap on teacher training, infrastructural oversight, and attitudinal obstructions, but students have a unique advantage of providing a learning experience as the final measure of inclusion success. Positively, when asked to give specific, concrete solutions, the students themselves came up with the following ideas: better training of the teachers, infrastructural investments, and programs of peer sensitization. To achieve its promise of equitable education as mandated in the RTE and RPwD Acts, policymakers in West Bengal need to put these lessons into practical practice: they need to focus on building teacher capacity by conducting regular and practical workshops; to make infrastructure upgrades and audits timely; and encourage school cultures that view diversity as a source of strength. This requires long-term dedication by all parties to change policy to practice in order to have equitable learning opportunities. It is only at this point that inclusive education can transform as a policy ideal into a practical experience that all primary schools can be described to.

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