

Chapter: 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a powerful driver of social change. Inclusive education – the practice of educating students of all abilities and backgrounds together in mainstream classrooms – has gained significant importance in recent decades as societies strive for equity and “Education for All.” According to the Salamanca Statement (1994), schools should **“accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions”**, reaffirming the right of every child to education within a single, inclusive system. This vision of inclusion reflects a global consensus that educational systems must adapt to *students’ diverse needs* rather than expect learners to fit rigid structures. International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) further cement the principle that children with disabilities should learn alongside peers without disabilities in regular schools, with appropriate support. In essence, inclusive education is about restructuring school cultures, policies, and practices so that they respond to the variability of all learners.

India, home to one of the largest education systems in the world, has embraced the idea of inclusive education at the policy level. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 defines inclusive education as *“a system of education wherein students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities”*. This definition underscores two critical aspects: learning together in a common environment, and adapting pedagogy to meet different needs. India’s commitment to inclusion is evident in constitutional provisions and legislation. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 guarantees free, compulsory education to all children aged 6–14, and was amended in 2012 to explicitly cover children with disabilities up to 18 years of age. Likewise, the RPWD Act (2016) mandates that educational institutions provide inclusive opportunities, including accessible infrastructure, individualized support services, and teacher training for inclusive education. Through programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the newer Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, the government has launched initiatives to improve school access and quality for children with special needs, such as provisioning of aids,

appliances, and resource teachers. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 further reinforces inclusive education, calling for “*barrier-free access*” to education for all children, the appointment of special educators, and the promotion of inclusive pedagogies and assessment practices. These policy measures illustrate a strong normative framework supporting inclusion.

Despite these commitments, *translating policy into practice* remains challenging. India’s education system still faces a significant inclusion gap on the ground. As of the 2011 Census, there were 7.86 million children with disabilities in India (roughly 1.7% of the child population). However, a UNESCO-supported report noted that *only about 61% of children with disabilities aged 5–19 years were attending any educational institution, compared to 71% of all children in that age group*. Alarmingly, approximately **27% of children with disabilities have never attended school**, a rate much higher than the 17% among the general child population. These statistics highlight that a large number of children with special needs are still being left behind. In Bihar state in particular, the challenges are pronounced – socio-economic disadvantages, rural-urban disparities, and resource constraints can exacerbate exclusion. A 2019 UNESCO report emphasized that three-fourths of five-year-old children with disabilities in India do not attend educational institutions at all. The problem is not merely one of access; even among those enrolled, many do not progress to higher levels of schooling, and dropout rates remain high for students with special needs. This scenario underscores the urgency of effective inclusive education practices in classrooms. It also suggests that *teachers* – who are the primary implementers of inclusion – play a pivotal role in determining whether these children are meaningfully included or only nominally enrolled.

Teachers are at the heart of inclusive education. It is widely acknowledged that the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of teachers can make or break inclusive initiatives in schools. If teachers are well-prepared and positively inclined towards inclusion, they can create supportive learning environments where all students thrive. Conversely, if teachers lack awareness or harbour negative attitudes, they may consciously or unconsciously become barriers to inclusion. Research across contexts has shown that teacher attitudes are often one of the biggest hurdles to implementing inclusive classroom practices. In the specific context of India, the challenge is multifaceted – many teachers have never received formal training in inclusive strategies, resources in classrooms are limited, and there may be deep-rooted misconceptions about the capabilities of children with disabilities or other marginalised groups. **Bihar**, being one of India’s educationally lagging states in some indicators, faces added difficulties such as larger class sizes, scarcity of special educators, and infrastructural shortcomings in schools. Chapra (Saran district of Bihar), the focus of this case

study, is no exception. It is against this backdrop that understanding the perspective of *pre-service teachers* – those currently training to become educators – becomes critically important. These future teachers will soon be at the forefront of classrooms and will carry the responsibility of actualising inclusive education ideals.

1.2 Inclusive Education: Concept and Importance

Inclusive education extends beyond merely placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms; it is about transforming the education system to respond to *all* learners' needs. According to UNESCO (1994), inclusive education is a process aimed at offering **“learning opportunities for all children within the regular education system by removing barriers to and within learning”**. This concept implies that differences among students (whether in ability, ethnicity, language, gender, socio-economic background, or any other characteristic) should be acknowledged and valued within the classroom. In an inclusive setup, *every* child is to feel welcomed, supported, and able to learn from the common curriculum, albeit with necessary adaptations or support services as required. UNICEF similarly defines inclusive education as meaning **“all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools... real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded”**, noting that inclusive systems value the unique contributions of students of all backgrounds and allow diverse groups to grow together for the benefit of all. In practical terms, inclusive education requires changes such as modifying teaching methods, providing additional learning aids or assistive technology, ensuring physical accessibility, and fostering a positive school climate that celebrates diversity.

The importance of inclusive education is rooted in principles of social justice, human rights, and educational effectiveness. By educating children together, inclusive education aims to break down stereotypes and build a more cohesive society where differences are respected. It helps all students develop empathy, cooperative skills, and positive attitudes towards diversity from an early age. For children with disabilities or other special needs, inclusive education provides access to the same educational opportunities as others, improving their academic and social outcomes in comparison to segregated schooling. At the same time, inclusive classrooms benefit typically developing children by enriching their learning experience – they learn to appreciate multiple perspectives and to assist peers, which can enhance their own mastery and interpersonal skills. Inclusive education is also seen as cost-effective and sustainable: rather than maintaining parallel systems of special schools, resources can be invested in one robust system that serves all learners. Perhaps most importantly,

inclusive education aligns with the moral imperative that *no child should be excluded* or discriminated against in education. As India strives to achieve its Sustainable Development Goal of inclusive and equitable quality education for all (SDG4), strengthening inclusive practices in every school becomes a key strategy.

In India's context, inclusive education takes on additional significance because of the country's vast diversity and historical disparities. Inclusion here not only refers to disability but also to other forms of marginalisation – such as gender, caste, minority status, language barriers, and poverty. India's classrooms often reflect the broad spectrum of society, and inclusive education in the Indian milieu must address multiple overlapping disadvantages. For instance, a child who is from a low-income family, belonging to a scheduled caste community, and who has a mild visual impairment faces a complex of challenges in accessing education. An inclusive approach in such a case would require the teacher to be sensitive to socio-economic hardships, cognisant of caste-based exclusion, and equipped to provide assistive tools for vision support – all within the regular classroom. This comprehensive view of inclusion aligns with India's *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Education for All Movement) and the NEP 2020's broadened definition of inclusivity, which includes not just children with disabilities but also those from “*socio-economically disadvantaged groups*” in its ambit. In short, inclusive education is integral to India's goal of universalising education and improving its quality; without inclusion, the goal of true universality, accessibility and equity remains elusive.

1.3 Teacher Education and Inclusive Education in India

Recognising that teachers are the agents who bring inclusion to life in classrooms, India's education planners have increasingly turned attention to the preparation of teachers for inclusive education. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) 2009 highlighted that teachers need to be “**highly skilled and accountable**” in creating a congenial atmosphere for all learners, calling for teacher education programs to equip prospective teachers with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required for inclusive classrooms. This means that *pre-service teacher education curricula* should include components on understanding diverse learners, adapting pedagogy to different learning needs, managing classrooms with heterogeneity, and collaborating with special educators or professionals. In line with this, since 2014 the Indian government (through NCTE regulations) mandated a course on inclusive education (often titled “Creating an Inclusive School”) in the two-year B.Ed. curriculum across universities. For example, universities such as

Delhi University, Mumbai University, and many others introduced compulsory papers on inclusive education in their B.Ed programs (usually in the second year or final semester). These courses typically cover disability awareness, inclusive teaching strategies, and relevant legislations. The intent is that by the time student-teachers graduate, they have at least foundational knowledge about inclusive education principles.

However, the reality of teacher education for inclusion in India still faces shortcomings. Studies have found that many B.Ed graduates still feel unprepared to implement inclusion in real classrooms. Often, the curriculum content on inclusive education is theoretical, lacking adequate field exposure or practical training. B.Ed students may learn definitions and policies but may not have opportunities to **interact with children with disabilities** or practice inclusive teaching methods during their training. For instance, a survey of 100 pre-service teachers in Delhi University revealed that while the vast majority (over 80%) had encountered special needs students during their practice teaching, a significant proportion felt only “slightly” or “moderately” confident about teaching in an inclusive classroom. Many expressed a need for additional training specifically focused on inclusion. Another study by Rajak and Gupta (2022) examining attitudes and self-efficacy of 154 pre-service teachers in Bihar found that overall attitudes were favourable, yet the authors emphasize an *“urgent need to provide the support system for training in inclusive practices”*. This suggests that even when attitudes are positive, practical competence might lag behind. Common gaps identified in teacher preparation include insufficient coursework on differentiated instruction, minimal focus on assistive technologies, and a lack of content on managing behavioural or learning difficulties in general classrooms.

In Bihar specifically, the challenge of teacher preparation is compounded by resource constraints. The state has been making efforts – for example, the Bihar government recently moved to hire over 7,000 special educators to support inclusive classrooms, and the Bihar Education Project Council had earlier developed short-term training modules (like the *Samarth* program in mid-2000s) to sensitize teachers on inclusive education. Additionally, DIETs and teacher training colleges in Bihar have begun integrating inclusive education topics in their in-service training sessions. Despite these steps, evaluations by educational NGOs indicate that many teachers in Bihar’s schools still lack awareness and skills for inclusive teaching. Teachers often cite large class sizes, lack of instructional materials, and rigid curricula as barriers to giving individualized attention to children

with special needs. These issues highlight that pre-service teacher education must be bolstered so that new teachers enter the profession better equipped to handle diversity.

Ultimately, the success of inclusive education hinges on teachers who are not only competent in subject matter and pedagogy, but also *emotionally and attitudinally committed* to the philosophy of inclusion. Teacher education institutions carry the responsibility of nurturing this commitment. By focusing on the next generation of teachers – the B.Ed students currently in training – we can gauge how well our teacher education system is instilling the values and competencies of inclusive education. Their perspectives can illuminate both strengths and blind spots in current preparation programs.

1.4 Rationale and Significance of the Study

The rationale for conducting this study stems from the recognition that sustainable inclusive education reform must begin with teacher preparation. Pre-service teachers are at a formative stage where attitudes can be shaped and skills can be built. By focusing on B.Ed students in Chapra, this research aims to provide insights that are both locally relevant and broadly informative. Chapra and similar areas in Bihar have their unique socio-cultural context; teachers here will face different realities (such as multilingual classrooms, higher rates of poverty, limited special education resources) compared to their counterparts in metropolitan areas. Hence, it is significant to document how aspiring teachers in such a context perceive inclusive education. This study can help identify whether the current teacher education programs in Chapra's colleges are adequately addressing inclusive education or if there are gaps that need attention.

From a policy and institutional perspective, the findings of this research will be valuable for teacher training institutions, curriculum designers, and educational authorities in Bihar. If the study finds, for example, that pre-service teachers have only superficial understanding of inclusive strategies, the state's teacher education curriculum might need revamping with more robust content on inclusion. If attitudinal issues or anxieties are prevalent, mentorship programs or sensitisation workshops could be introduced. The study's significance also lies in giving *voice* to pre-service teachers – by capturing their perspectives, challenges, and suggestions, the research ensures that the experiences of those who are often the implementers (but rarely the decision-makers) inform the conversation on inclusive education implementation. Moreover, this case study can contribute to the academic literature by adding data from a part of India that is under-represented in research. Much

of the literature on teacher attitudes in India has focused on regions like Delhi, Maharashtra, or the southern states. By studying Chapra, we gain insight into the situation in the Hindi heartland, which might resonate with other low-resource settings.

Finally, the significance extends to the ultimate beneficiaries – students in schools. When teachers are well-prepared and positively inclined, students with disabilities and other learning needs are more likely to receive quality education. Conversely, if new teachers enter the workforce ill-equipped for inclusion, students requiring support might continue to be excluded in subtle ways (even if they are physically present in classrooms). Thus, this study, in shining a light on pre-service teacher preparedness, is indirectly aimed at improving the educational experiences of children who have historically been marginalised. In summary, the rationale for this study is grounded in the urgent need to strengthen the foundation of inclusive education through teacher preparation, and its significance lies in the potential to inform targeted improvements in policy, practice, and further research.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What is the current level of awareness and conceptual understanding of inclusive education among pre-service teachers in Chapra’s B.Ed colleges?
2. What are the attitudes of these pre-service teachers towards inclusive education and inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms?
3. How prepared do pre-service teachers feel to implement inclusive teaching strategies, and in which areas (if any) do they lack confidence?
4. What challenges or barriers do pre-service teachers anticipate when they think about executing inclusive education in real classrooms?
5. Are there differences in perspectives on inclusive education between male and female B.Ed students, or between students from the two different colleges studied?

1.6 Statement of the Problem

The problem is stated as: **“Pre-service Teachers’ (B.Ed. Students) Perspectives on Inclusive Education: A Case Study of Teacher Education Colleges in Chapra (Bihar)”**.

1.7 Operational Definition of Key Terms

Pre-service Teachers’: This refers to the students who are pursuing Bachelor of Education programme of study.

Perspectives: This refers to the overall attitude, acceptance, know how and understanding regarding Inclusive Education and its need among the students.

Inclusive Education: This refers to a system of education where all children — regardless of their physical, mental, social, or economic conditions — learn together in the same classroom, receiving equal opportunities, support, and respect. It emphasizes removing barriers to learning and ensuring the full participation of every learner.

1.8 Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following main objectives:

1. To assess the level of awareness and understanding of inclusive education among pre-service teachers in teacher education colleges of Chapra.
2. To examine the attitudes of B.Ed students towards inclusive education, particularly their willingness to include children with diverse needs (such as disabilities or learning difficulties) in regular classrooms and their beliefs about the outcomes of such inclusion.
3. To evaluate the self-perceived preparedness and self-efficacy of pre-service teachers for implementing inclusive practices.
4. To identify the challenges and concerns that pre-service teachers anticipate in the implementation of inclusive education.
5. To explore any notable differences in perspectives based on selected demographics

1.9 Delimitations of the Study

- Study has been delimited to Chapra (District Headquarters of Saran District, Bihar)
- Study has been delimited to two Teacher Training colleges.
- Study has been delimited to only final year B.Ed. students.