Inclusion of children with autism in a mainstreamed school: a case study analysis

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools is essential for fostering social integration and equitable education; however, significant challenges persist in implementation worldwide. This study investigates inclusion practices for children with autism in a mainstream school, focusing on barriers and enablers in creating an inclusive educational environment. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 16 participants, including one principal, eight teachers, three special educators, and four parents, selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of school policies and documents provided comprehensive insights, analysed through thematic analysis with triangulation to ensure robustness. Findings revealed critical challenges, such as limited resources, inadequate teacher preparedness, and social stigma, while highlighting effective practices like individualized education plans (IEPs), peer mentoring, and collaborative approaches to IEP development. The study underscores the importance of policy reforms, targeted teacher training, and greater community involvement to support sustainable inclusion. These findings offer actionable recommendations for improving inclusive practices and creating supportive learning environments for children with autism, advancing the broader agenda of inclusive education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties in social communication and interaction, as well as repetitive behaviors and interests. It significantly impacts individuals, leading to challenges in communication, adaptability, and social integration. Global research, including studies by the World Health Organization (WHO), [1] estimates that ASD affects approximately 76% of children worldwide. In India, the prevalence of autism is around 1 in 100 children under 10, with more recent estimates indicating 1 in 68, highlighting the increasing recognition of the disorder. In response to this growing prevalence, there has been a strong emphasis on inclusive education, which seeks to integrate children with special needs, including those with autism, into mainstream schools. Inclusive education, as defined by Clough and Corbett, [2] focuses on ensuring that all children, regardless of their differences, receive appropriate educational opportunities. The UNESCO Salamanca Declaration of 1994 further reinforced the need for educational systems to accommodate children with special needs,

promoting the adoption of a socio-ecological approach. This approach emphasizes adapting educational systems to the diverse needs of students rather than expecting students to conform to existing structures.

Research consistently demonstrates the benefits of inclusive education for students with and without disabilities [3], [4]. Inclusive environments foster social integration, appreciation of diversity, and academic success. These settings also promote self-esteem, peer acceptance, and socio-emotional growth [5]–[8]. However, integrating children with autism into mainstream schools poses unique challenges, such as insufficient teacher training, limited resources, social stigma, and the need for individualized support [9]. India's legislative and policy framework, including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the National Policy on Education, 2020, underscores the country's commitment to inclusive education. These initiatives aim to ensure equal opportunities, protect the rights of individuals with disabilities, and promote full participation in educational settings. Despite these efforts, challenges persist, particularly in the practical implementation of inclusive education for children with autism.

The inclusion of children with autism in mainstream classrooms often encounters barriers such as inadequate teacher preparation, a lack of specialized resources, and social stigma. Although educators and parents generally support inclusion, the absence of well-developed models and procedures for effectively integrating children with autism into general education classrooms remains a significant hurdle. Research highlights the need for specialized training and professional development for teachers to create truly inclusive environments. Despite the challenges, inclusive education offers substantial benefits for children with autism, particularly when supported by early diagnosis, early intervention, and active parental involvement [10]–[12]. Mainstream classrooms can provide higher levels of social support and educational aspirations compared to special schools [13]. However, the success of inclusive education for children with autism depends on the development of effective strategies, best practices, and tailored support systems [14]–[18].

To address these challenges, this study examines the inclusion of children with autism in a mainstream school setting, guided by the following research questions: i) Does the school align with the criteria for an inclusive school as defined in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016?; ii) How has the implementation of inclusion policies affected the school's operations, particularly in class organization and conduct?; iii) Does the school's admission policy adhere to the principles of inclusion outlined in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016?

This research aims to bridge existing gaps in understanding the complexities of inclusive education for children with autism. It highlights both the benefits and the challenges of integrating autistic children into mainstream school settings. By emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies, evidence-based best practices, and individualized support systems, the study seeks to promote successful and sustainable inclusion.

2.　METHOD

This qualitative case study employs a triangulated approach to explore the inclusion of children with autism in a mainstream school, focusing on the perspectives of key stakeholders such as the principal, teachers, special educators, and parents. The research aimed to capture the complex dynamics of inclusive education, particularly with the implementation of policies outlined in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. To address this, the study employed a multi-method data collection strategy, combining interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to gain a holistic understanding of the subject. The study included 16 participants: 1 principal, 8 teachers, 3 special educators, and 4 parents of children with autism. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives. Sample size adequacy was determined based on thematic saturation, as supported by prior qualitative studies. Saturation is an important indicator that a sample is adequate for the phenomenon studied that data collected have captured the diversity, depth, and nuances of the issues studied–and thereby demonstrates content validity [19]. Reaching saturation has become a critical component of qualitative research that helps make data collection robust and valid [20].

2.1. Data collection method

To ensure a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of inclusion practices, the study utilized three main data collection methods. These included interviews with educators, classroom observations, and document analysis of school policies. This triangulated approach allowed for a more in-depth exploration of how inclusion is implemented and experienced in real-world educational settings.

2.1.1. Semi-structured interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, 8 teachers, 3 special educators, and 4 parents of children with autism as shown in Table 1 for participant demographics and characteristics. These

interviews were designed to allow stakeholders to share their insights on how inclusive practices are implemented, their experiences, and any challenges faced (attached as Appendix). The semi-structured format provided flexibility for participants to delve into personal experiences while allowing researchers to address core themes related to the research questions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Transcriptions were made verbatim to ensure data accuracy.

Table 1. Demographic distribution and characteristics of participants

Participant type	Number of participants	Gender	Role/relationship	Interview duration (Range)	Additional notes
Principal	1	Female	School leadership	45-90 minutes	Provided insights on overall inclusion policies and school vision.
Teachers	8	6 Female, 2 Male	Classroom teachers	45-90 minutes	Representing different grades, shared classroom inclusion experiences.
Special educators	3	3 Female	Special education support	45-90 minutes	Involved in developing and implementing IEPs for children with autism.
Parents of children with autism	4	3 Female, 1 Male	Parents of children with autism	45-90 minutes	Discussed personal experiences and challenges related to their child's inclusion.
Total participants	16	Mixed	Various	45-90 minutes	Diverse perspectives on inclusion practices and challenges.

2.1.2. Classroom observations

Researchers conducted non-participant observations of classroom interactions to assess real-time practices related to the inclusion of children with autism. Observations focused on teacher-student interactions, the use of individualized support strategies, and peer dynamics. A detailed observation protocol was developed to ensure consistency across different classrooms and was used for documentation. Each classroom was observed on three occasions, each for a full day, capturing both structured learning activities and unstructured times, such as lunch breaks, to provide a well-rounded view of the school's inclusion practices.

2.1.3. Analysis of school policies and documents

To contextualize the observed inclusion practices, a thorough examination of the school's formal policies, individualized education plans (IEPs), and other relevant documentation was conducted. This document analysis sought to uncover how the school's institutional frameworks supported or hindered inclusion, as well as whether the formal policies were reflected in day-to-day practices. The review included admission policies, staff training programs, and the school's strategic vision for inclusive education.

2.2. Data analysis and decision-making process

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify key themes emerging from the interviews, observations, and document reviews. The process involved several stages, including data familiarization, coding, theme development, and refinement. This systematic approach helped ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences and the contextual realities of inclusive education practices.

2.2.1. Coding

All interview transcripts and observation notes were coded using a combination of open and axial coding [19] to ensure that both expected and emergent themes were captured. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, researchers independently coded the data before meeting to compare and consolidate their findings. This collaborative process supported inter-coder reliability and strengthened the overall validity of the thematic analysis.

2.2.2. Triangulation

To enhance the validity of the findings, data from interviews, observations, and document analysis were triangulated. This allowed researchers to cross-verify information from multiple sources and identify any discrepancies or consistent patterns across different forms of data. For instance, insights from teacher interviews about peer interactions were compared with observational data to assess consistency.

2.2.3. Inclusion and exclusion of data

The decision to include or exclude specific data was based on pre-established criteria, primarily focusing on the relevance to the research questions and the completeness of the data. For example, interviews where participants provided vague or irrelevant responses that did not address the study's core focus were either partially excluded or de-emphasized in the analysis. Additionally, classroom observations with technical issues (e.g., unclear audio recordings) were excluded from the analysis to ensure data quality.

2.3. Longitudinal approach

Data collection occurred over a six-month period, allowing for a longitudinal examination of evolving inclusion practices. This approach enabled the researchers to capture dynamic shifts in school operations, stakeholder perspectives, and the impact of inclusion policies over time. By revisiting the same participants and observing the same classrooms at different points in time, the study was able to track changes in the school's inclusive practices and address emerging challenges or improvements.

2.4. Pilot study

To ensure question clarity and participant interpretation, a pilot study was conducted wherein four teachers, one parent, and one special educator were presented with draft interview questions. Subsequent interviews were then conducted based on these drafts. Feedback from participants was obtained post-interview, leading to revisions and finalization of interview questions. The pilot interviews offered valuable insights, particularly highlighting the importance of pre-negotiating interview recording methods with participants. This approach facilitated the identification and resolution of any ambiguous, confusing, or insensitive questions, thereby ensuring subsequent interviews were conducted efficiently and produced meaningful data.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Alignment with inclusive school criteria

The study found that the school closely aligns with the criteria outlined in the rights of persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, for an inclusive educational institution. It actively promotes the inclusion of children with autism by providing necessary accommodations, support services, and a conducive learning environment. But as per the statistics from the U.S. Department of Education for the years 2018–2022 indicate that only 40% of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms receive services for 80% or more of their time, lower than the overall level of 64% for all children with disabilities [21].

3.2. Impact of inclusion policies on school operations

Implementation of inclusion policies has significantly influenced the school's operations, particularly in class organization and conduct. Teachers have adapted their instructional strategies to cater to diverse learning needs, leading to more inclusive classroom environments. Additionally, the school has invested resources in staff training and support to ensure the effective implementation of inclusion practices. The findings of the present study contradict the findings of a qualitative research [22] that aimed to understand how children with autism are treated in integration departments. The study, employing semi-structured interviews, found that kindergarten teachers encounter challenges in co-educating children with autism. Additionally, there was a lack of frequent cooperation between general and special education kindergarten teachers, leading to difficulties in adapting programs to the needs of all children. Additionally, two studies had similar findings as the present study. A study [23] investigated the views of general and special education teachers on inclusive education, particularly the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream classrooms. The research highlighted positive attitudes among teachers toward inclusion, emphasizing the importance of creating a school environment where all students can learn without segregation. However, teachers identified challenges such as inadequate material and technical infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and limited cooperation between general and special education teachers. In a related study [24] the perspectives of primary school teachers in Zimbabwe regarding the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream settings were explored. Despite some uncertainty, teachers expressed positive attitudes toward inclusion and suggested the integration of a school psychologist to support both themselves and children with autism [25], [26]. There was a unanimous call for continuous specialization on inclusion and autism among teachers.

3.3. Adherence of admission policy to inclusion principles

The school's admission policy demonstrates adherence to the principles of inclusion outlined in the rights of persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. It ensures equitable access to education for children with

autism, considering individual needs and providing necessary support services during the admission process. Moreover, the school prioritizes creating a diverse and inclusive student body reflective of the community it serves. In a survey [27] done to examine the attitudes of secondary education and special education teachers toward integrating children with autism into mainstream settings, the findings underscored the importance placed by teachers on the inclusion of children with autism in general schools, as they believed it would benefit them in various aspects of their lives. The study identified several key strategies employed by the school to facilitate the inclusion of children with autism.

3.3.1. Individualized support plans

Each child with autism has a personalized support plan developed collaboratively with parents, teachers, and specialists. These individualized plans outline the child's specific needs, strengths, and recommended accommodations to support academic and social development. By aligning strategies across home and school environments, the plans help create a consistent and supportive framework that promotes meaningful learning outcomes.

3.3.2. Teacher training and support

Teachers undergo specialized training to better understand autism, implement evidence-based instructional practices, and effectively manage challenging behaviors. This foundational training equips educators with the skills needed to create inclusive and supportive classroom environments. Additionally, ongoing support from special education staff and continuous professional development opportunities further enhance teacher competence and confidence in meeting the diverse needs of their students.

3.3.3. Peer support and social integration

The school actively promotes peer acceptance and social integration for children with autism. Strategies such as buddy systems, structured social activities, and inclusive classroom initiatives are implemented to foster empathy and mutual understanding among students. These efforts help create a supportive school culture where diversity is respected and meaningful peer relationships are encouraged. Teachers also facilitate classroom discussions and activities that celebrate differences and promote inclusive values. As a result, students with autism experience a greater sense of belonging and are more likely to participate actively in both academic and social aspects of school life.

3.3.4. Sensory-friendly environment

Classrooms are thoughtfully designed to accommodate the sensory sensitivities often experienced by children with autism. Quiet spaces are provided within or near the classroom to allow students to self-regulate when overwhelmed by noise or activity. Sensory tools such as stress balls, fidget items, and noise-canceling headphones are made available to help students manage their sensory input. Visual supports, including schedules, cues, and instructional aids, are used to enhance understanding and reduce anxiety related to transitions or unfamiliar tasks. These adaptations collectively create a calming and structured environment that supports focus, comfort, and active participation in learning.

3.3.5. Parental involvement and collaboration

Parents play an active role in their child's education through participation in individualized education program (IEP) meetings, workshops, and support groups. Open communication channels between parents and school staff facilitate collaboration, ensuring alignment between home and school environments. This study delves into the intricate landscape of inclusive education for children with autism within a mainstream school. Through comprehensive interviews with various stakeholders, principals, teachers, special educators, and parents of children with autism the research aims to offer a nuanced comprehension of inclusive practices within a specific school environment. Employing a qualitative research approach involving semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and scrutiny of school policies, the study delves into the hurdles, tactics, and outcomes linked with the integration of children with autism.

The study underscores the pivotal role of inclusive education in nurturing social integration, academic achievement, and overall well-being for children with autism. By spotlighting key strategies implemented by the school, such as personalized support plans, teacher training, peer support initiatives, and creation of sensory-friendly environments, the research sheds light on fundamental elements of effective inclusion practices. Furthermore, it accentuates the significance of parental involvement and collaboration, underscoring the necessity for a cohesive partnership between educators and families to address the diverse needs of children with autism. Previous research highlights that the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools faces challenges such as resource disparities, economic and psychological pressures on parents [28]–[30] and inconsistent inclusive attitudes from typical children and their families [28], [31], [32]. Parents have high expectations for enforceable policies and smooth educational transitions, supported by

models like satellite classes and Early Intervention Program for Infants and Children (EIPIC) centers [33], [34]. Despite efforts, gaps remain in aligning parental experiences with teachers' self-evaluations on inclusion [35]. Research indicates that teachers with advanced special education training possess better knowledge about autism and inclusion, highlighting the need for improved educator training and collaborative support [36]–[39].

The findings of the study unveil the affirmative impact of inclusive practices, extending beyond children with autism to benefit their neurotypical peers. By fostering empathy, promoting diversity appreciation, and cultivating inclusive attitudes among all students, inclusive education emerges as a transformative catalyst within educational settings. In sum, this study contributes valuable insights into the intricacies of inclusive education for children with autism, offering insights into both challenges and promising practices in nurturing a genuinely inclusive learning environment. Research highlights several factors influencing the quality of inclusive education for children with autism, including the enactment and enforcement of relevant laws and regulations, severity of disabilities, allocation and utilization of resources, school leadership styles, acceptance by mainstream school stakeholders, development of social support systems, and parental involvement [40]–[43].

4.   CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical factors that enable the successful inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools: tailored support systems, continuous teacher training, fostering peer acceptance, and ensuring active parental involvement. By employing a qualitative design, this research effectively captured the nuanced perspectives of key stakeholders and examined the practical application of inclusive education policies. The specific goals of the design were to assess the alignment of school practices with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and to explore how inclusion policies impact classroom dynamics. The development approach through interviews, observations, and policy analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing inclusion. However, to further refine inclusive education practices, future research should focus on longitudinal studies that assess long-term outcomes, especially in areas like teacher training models and parental involvement strategies. Additionally, examining peer relationships, evaluating the implementation of policies, and exploring the role of technology and innovative interventions can offer further insights into how to enhance the learning experience for children with autism. By addressing these areas in future studies, inclusive education can continue to evolve, ensuring that children with autism not only succeed academically but also thrive socially and emotionally within mainstream schools.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Finita Glory Roy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	
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C : **C**onceptualization	I : **I**nvestigation	Vi : **Vi**sualization
M : **M**ethodology	R : **R**esources	Su : **Su**pervision
So : **So**ftware	D : **D**ata Curation	P : **P**roject administration
Va : **Va**lidation	O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft	Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis	E : Writing - Review & **E**diting	

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
Authors state no conflict of interest.

ETHICAL APPROVAL
Ethical approval was obtained from the institution's review board (RERB/2024/145). Participants were informed about the study's aims and procedures, and their consent was secured before data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the process, and pseudonyms were used in place of actual names during data analysis and reporting.

DATA AVAILABILITY
Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [FR], on request. The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials.

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APPENDIX

Topic guide
Interview questions to the principal
Policy development:
1. Does the school prioritize inclusive education, ensuring that all children, regardless of their needs, are educated together for both curricular and social purposes?
2. To what extent do the management and teaching staff actively support the implementation of a whole-school approach to educating students with Autism?
3. Does the school's admissions policy adhere to the principles outlined in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), ensuring the admission and full participation of students with autism?
4. Is the school's discipline policy/code of behavior sufficiently flexible to accommodate individual differences, particularly for students with autism?
5. Does the school utilize team teaching strategies to effectively address the needs of students with autism?

Professional development:
1. How well-informed are staff members about their roles and responsibilities concerning students with autism?

2. Does the school actively encourage and facilitate the participation of all staff members in appropriate professional development opportunities related to special education?
3. Does the school actively promote parental involvement and facilitate communication between parents and teachers?

Curriculum development:
1. How does the school support students academically and socially in the classroom, ensuring that teachers utilize differentiation strategies?
2. Are co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that support and enhance learning made accessible to all students with autism?
3. Are the needs and interests of all students, including those with autism, considered when determining the range of subjects, levels, and programs?

Quality of Teaching and Learning:
1. Do teachers effectively employ diverse teaching strategies and methodologies to meet the needs of all students, including those with autism?
2. Does the school provide an appropriate, safe, and stimulating environment for all students, fostering a sense of belonging and security, displaying inclusive work on walls, and arranging physical spaces to accommodate diverse needs?
3. How does the school assess students, and are there any challenges in the assessment procedures that need to be addressed in alignment with children with autism?

Interview questions for Teachers
1. Have you had experience teaching or working with children with autism in your classroom?
2. Do you feel you have sufficient resources available to effectively teach children with autism?
3. What specific challenges do you encounter when instructing children with autism?
4. How crucial do you perceive the role of a special needs assistant when teaching a class that includes one or more students with autism?
5. Do you employ a diverse range of teaching methodologies, such as scaffolding, modeling, peer tutoring, active learning, and cooperative group work, to accommodate the learning needs of all students, including those with autism?
6. Are all students, regardless of their special needs, encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities?
7. What strategies do you implement to ensure the active participation of students with autism in classroom lessons?
8. Do you believe you have received adequate training to effectively teach children with autism?
9. In your opinion, does the school exemplify inclusivity, where all children are educated together for both curricular and social reasons, regardless of their needs? If yes, what factors contribute to this inclusivity? If not, what steps could be taken to enhance inclusivity?
10. How do you propose the school could further promote inclusivity?

Interview questions for special educator
1. How would you define your role as a Special educator, particularly in supporting students with autism?
2. What aspects of your job working with students with autism do you find most rewarding?
3. Can you walk me through what a typical day assisting students with autism looks like for you?
4. In your view, does this school effectively embody inclusivity, particularly for students with autism? If yes, what factors contribute to this inclusive environment? If not, what measures could be implemented to enhance inclusivity for students with autism?
5. What do you consider to be the primary challenges faced by Special Educators when working with students with autism?
6. What do you perceive as the most significant obstacles you encounter when providing support to students with autism in the classroom?
7. Considering the future, what recommendations would you propose to foster the inclusion of students with autism within this school community?

Interview questions for Parents.
1. What led you to choose this school for your child, particularly considering their needs as a student with autism?

2. Can you elaborate on the factors that played a significant role in your decision to enroll your child in this school?
3. From your perspective, are there sufficient resources available in this school to adequately support children with special needs, including those with autism?
4. What specific resources do you believe are indispensable for effectively teaching children with autism?
5. What are your aspirations for your child's growth and development within this school environment?
6. How crucial do you view the importance of strong communication between teachers and parents, especially concerning the education of children with autism?
7. In your opinion, does this school exhibit inclusivity, particularly in its approach to educating students with autism? If so, what elements contribute to this inclusivity? If not, what strategies could be implemented to enhance inclusivity for students with autism?
8. How do you envision the school becoming more inclusive, specifically in supporting the needs of students with autism?

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