



Inclusive Education in Nepal: Historical Development, National Policies, and Implementation Gaps

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Abstract

This study explores the development of inclusive education (IE) from global perspectives to its implementation in Nepal. It first traces the historical evolution of education and special education in Nepal, from restricted access under the Rana regime to the National Education System Plan (1971), the establishment of the Special Education Council (1973), and the Special Education Policy (1996), situating this trajectory within the broader global shift from segregation and the medical model of disability toward a rights-based approach guided by frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The study builds on this and looks at the policy development and progress towards inclusive education in Nepal, including its constitutional and legal commitments, and continues to highlight the barriers in implementation (including weak implementation, inadequate teacher training, inaccessible infrastructure and systemic barriers related to caste, gender, and geography). It states that inclusive education is not just an education that is provided for a student who has special needs, but an inclusive education as a wider education approach in order to achieve social justice, equity and diversity. The author finally concludes that systemic changes in the curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training and community support systems are needed in order to realize inclusive education in Nepal.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Disability inclusion; Educational equity; Social justice; Nepal education system

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Introduction

Education plays a vital role in meeting the need to adjust to the diversity of contemporary societies and is a key component in moving towards social progress. The complexity of modern societies, which present various differences in terms of talents, cultures, languages, and backgrounds, offer a number of opportunities and challenges to schools (National Statistics Office, 2025). In diverse, equitable and socially just societies, schools should provide equal and fair opportunities for learning for all children. Inclusive education takes the emphasis on the active participation and learning outcomes of all learners in order to substantially decrease exclusion. It thus encourages learners to be productive, responsible and socially engaged citizens (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). Considering such importance, the promotion of inclusive education is a main issue of the global educational reform. One of the main means of providing equal access, participation and achievement for all learners is inclusive education, which is advocated by international organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, the United Nations (UN) and United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2022). Because of this, several countries have moved to including inclusive education in their national policy statements and have been pushing for progress in policy making and implementation processes (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2014; UNESCO, 2020) and Nepal has made efforts to progress in policy making and implementation (MoE, 2014; UNESCO, 2020).

In inclusive education, the term education is understood as a system in which all children, irrespective of their physical, mental, social, linguistic or economic status are educated in the same classroom. Such a approach is explicit in terms of avoiding discrimination and exclusion because of talent, culture, gender, geography, background and socio-economic status (Mezzanotte, 2022; UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, this paradigm is compatible with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations 2026), inclusive and equitable quality education. Looking at the world from a wider perspective, inclusive education is a challenge to implement. One of the challenges is the lack of a common, agreed-upon definition. This ambiguity is because there is no clarity and precision about the concepts of 'integration', 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education', which need to be distinguished and further developed. Furthermore, inclusive education is often perceived as being used for only students with special educational needs or students with certain difficulties (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017), whereas it is a wide-spread concept that is used for all students. The policy-practice-outcome gap is one of the key development challenges highlighted in the Sixteenth Plan for Nepal, stalling the implementation of inclusive and equitable education for everyone (National Planning Commission, 2024).

It will be necessary, if these misconceptions and practices are to be broken down, to return to the concept of the movement. This article tries to reflect the historical path of

inclusive education from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) to the current situation (United Nations, 2015). In doing so, it sheds light on different definitions, philosophical views, and the multifaceted aspects of its social context. Finally, this detailed analysis aims at giving the definition and a common language in educational systems. If there is no clear discourse to distinguish inclusive education from other, but related, concepts, the effective implementation of inclusive education will continue to be a huge challenge on a global level and in the Nepalese education system.

Meaning of Inclusive Education: Situating Nepal

Education is not merely about gathering knowledge; it is a way of life that enhances the ability of an individual to think, understand and problem solve, which will lead to the change in the individual and society (Niazi, 2025). Accordingly, the curriculum is built to reflect the values of society and to respond to changing society's needs (Curriculum Development Center, 2019). The educational perspective is constantly changing and revolving with social changes and thus there is a clear connection between educational philosophies and social changes at a particular time and location. In order to understand the concept of inclusive education in its complexity, it is necessary to examine the process of its development from the perspective of the evolution of the social view of inclusive education at different stages of history.

Inclusive education is an on-going process. It is a set of principles to recognize and address differences and needs, promote the inclusion of all students in learning and reduce systemic exclusion in the learning context (UNESCO, 2005). The concept of inclusive education is not interpreted as simply children with disability being placed in mainstream classrooms, but as a restructuring of the education system to ensure children can learn and participate in the education system in the same setting (Thomas & Vaughan, 2004). Inclusive education is a whole process strategy to identify and eliminate all the barriers that prevent learning participation of every student (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2019; MoEST, 2022).

Inclusive education, which was prioritized in the Constitution of Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2015), national education policy and the School Education Sector Plan (MoEST, 2022) for the period of 2022-2032, falls under the influence of a “medical model” in the process of implementation. There is a consistent view that inclusive education is solely about students with special needs and not about students' needs in general. This limited interpretation continues to be a problem in the implementation of the participatory and rights-based approach of inclusive education in practice.

However, in the wake of the international trend of countries moving towards inclusive education, Nepal has adopted some policies on inclusive education. This change is

moving away from the “integration” and “assimilation” model that deals with services for pupils with special needs to a more holistic view of the needs of diverse and inclusive classrooms (UNESCO, 2020).

Inclusive education's development is inextricably linked with the transformation of social and educational concepts regarding diversity, equity and the right to education. An understanding of the historical background is key to understanding how educational concepts, policies and practices have been changed around the world. In the end, the study of this development arc can enlighten the world's journey, and the constant efforts to make inclusive, diversity-sensitive and equity-driven education for everyone a reality. In this context, this study analyzes the development of inclusive education in Nepal and its application in practice.

Literature Overview: Evolution of Inclusive Education Paradigms

Prior to 1950, in many nations the only way for children with physical, intellectual, and other kinds of disabilities to receive education was through segregated schools, and children with disabilities were systematically excluded from the mainstream of public education. In those days, children with special needs were generally taught in special schools or in separate schools and not in mainstream schools.

Education philosophy changed markily, however, after World War II with the general acceptance of the idea of providing children of all with equal educational opportunities. However, the most significant reference to education in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was that of the provision of education being an inalienable right of all people, and that no one should be denied this right for any reason (United Nations, 2015). This statement was in support of the principle that all people – the gifted, people with learning problems, people with intellectual disabilities, and those of different socio-cultural backgrounds – should have the same educational opportunities.

But it is not enough to have the right to education by itself under a legal framework. Such implementation calls for broad changes in attitudes, policies, structures and practices within society. Thus, the rights-based approach to inclusive education places emphasis on the need to reform the school and society on the principles of equality, justice and participation.

The Integration and Inclusion Movement

A major paradigm shift in the educational system took place in the 1980s and 1990s from integration to inclusion. Much of this change was driven by the social movements representing the rights of people with disabilities, in particular by the thinking of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation and the ‘social model of disability’ developed by Mike Oliver in 1983 (Oliver 1996).

The social approach to disability was to say that disability is not a person's personal responsibility but is a result of the barriers imposed on the person by society and so society is responsible for finding the solution. From this viewpoint, it's important to highlight that legal and policy measures must be taken to remove these structural barriers and achieve equality in education.

With respect to education, the term "integration" became part of the educational vocabulary and promoted the idea of integration of students with special needs into the mainstream schools. This was, however, usually dependent on them being able to fit into the school system and to attend regular school, when they were seen to be able to do so (Graham 2024). This "as long as it is possible" was related to the ideology of normalization which was quite narrow, and which required the presence of students with disabilities if they could more or less integrate with the mainstream.

Inclusive Education as a Global Goal of 21st-Century Values

In the 21st century, inclusive education is a major development of education agendas around the world. Inclusive education has been highlighted as a value to be promoted in inclusive education both at international level through policies and declarations, and on the ground through practice. Since 2001, inclusive education has developed beyond the remit of those with special educational needs to become more than just about eliminating the exclusion of children with special needs (Ainscow et al., 2006; Ainscow, 2020). In this model, schools and educational systems need to recognise the diversity of needs, capabilities, backgrounds and identities among all children and need to offer them equal opportunities to participate. Inclusive education is not only designed to provide special services, but it is also about access to quality education for groups of people marginalized by social, economic, linguistic, cultural or other reasons.

In the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted in 2006 by the United Nations (UNCRPD), the right of the person with a disability to education without discrimination and based on the principle of equal opportunity is affirmed. Since ratification of this convention, Nepal has made strides in legal and policy changes to further improve the inclusiveness of its education system. The Convention places a responsibility on the State to ensure inclusivity at all levels of the educational system and lifelong learning opportunities (United Nations, 2006).

Moreover, UNESCO (2009) has defined inclusive education as a way to enhance the system's capacity to respond to all learners who are excluded from the education system because of their social, economic, linguistic, cultural, health or disability status. This conceptual approach has broadened the inclusive education paradigm in Nepal from special education to one that includes all marginalised groups.

Inclusive education has made the transition from a disability and segregation perspective to a perspective of equity and participation as revealed in the literature. Yet,

despite policy efforts and international commitments to inclusive education in Nepal, there are policy-practice gaps. This study aims at analyzing the challenges and opportunities of the development and implementation of inclusive education in Nepal.

Objectives and Methodology

The objectives of the study were to trace the history of education and special education in Nepal and to study the policy development, progress and problems of inclusive education in the context of Nepal. The national and educational policies regarding inclusive education were reviewed using a document analysis method (Bowen, 2009) with special emphasis on Nepal. International documents reviewed are UNESCO publications and key national documents include Consolidated Equity Strategy (MoE, 2014), Constitution of Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2015), School Education Sector Plan (2022–2032) (MoEST, 2022), Sixteenth Periodic Plan of Nepal (National Planning Commission, 2024), and a thematic report on Education and Inclusion in Nepal (National Population and Housing Census 2021) (National Statistics Office, 2025). Other relevant policy documents were also reviewed to have a comprehensive understanding of the inclusive education in Nepal.

The Findings: Historical Development of Education and Special Education in Nepal

The education system for children with special needs has come up in Nepal comparatively lately. After 1951, with the restoration of democracy, the process of growth of school education started to pick up pace. The Government of Nepal formalized the education sector by beginning to institute the National Education System Plan (NESP) in 1971, laying the base for institutional development of special education. This plan included the establishment of a Special Education Council under MEC, which helped formalize the state's responsibility for special education. In 1973, a Special Education Council was established with the Minister of Education as its chair to promote and manage special education in the country. However, during this period, there was only limited progress in the sector, primarily because of the traditional attitude of many people that children with disabilities are a burden to their family (Research Center for Educational Innovation and Development [CERID] cited in Shahi 2022; Singh 2023).

Policy and practice regarding inclusive education and the education of persons with disabilities in Nepal is much related to international impact, political changes and national needs. Prior to 1950, during the Rana regime, education was restricted to a privileged minority, as the expansion of mass education was discouraged due to fears regarding the empowerment of the citizenry. Following the collapse of the Rana regime and the establishment of a democratic system in 1951, a new phase of educational expansion commenced (Adhikari, 2024). Special needs education in Nepal has a short

history. After 1951, some efforts were made to educate children with disabilities. The National Education System Plan (1971) was the first policy that recognized the need for special education and led to the establishment of the Special Education Council in 1973. However, progress was slow due to social stigma and negative beliefs about disability. Over time, awareness and policy efforts helped promote special and inclusive education in Nepal (Jung & Shiwakoti, 2017).

The National Education System Plan (NESP) of 1971 established the essential policy foundation for special education (Pradhan, 2018). This led to the formation of the Special Education Council in 1973, which assumed the leadership role in the formal development and policy formulation of special education in Nepal. This is widely regarded as the formal inception of special education in the country.

The Special Education Policy, 2053 (1996) was introduced to promote education, social participation, and independence among persons with disabilities in Nepal. Although special education programs started in 2021 B.S. (1964), systematic development began after the National Education System Plan (1971), which led to the establishment of the Special Education Council in 1973. The policy focused on the role of the government to increase and control special education services and to lessen reliance on outside services (Government of Nepal 1996).

After the end of the Rana regime in 1951, public education started to grow in Nepal (National Statistics Office 2025). After democracy was restored in 1990, the level of education was raised throughout the country and greater progress was made. Under the Constitution of Nepal (2015), education is a fundamental right and it guarantees free compulsory basic education, free education at secondary school. The education system today is underpinned by the Compulsory and Free Education Act (2018), the National Education Policy (2019) and School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032). These policies, in combination with the scholarship programmes for the disadvantaged groups, seek to enhance equity and inclusion within education.

Inclusive Education in Nepal: Policy Development, Progress, and Challenges

The idea of inclusive education has grown gradually in Nepal, gaining momentum with the changing values, educational philosophies, and policy–legislative context. It is founded on both national and international efforts for the cause of equality, social justice and the basic right to "Education for All. Though early focus was on separate education for children with disability and special needs, the focus has now begun to move away from the concept of integration to that of inclusive education. Importantly, Nepal has made a number of policy strides to promote equal access, participation and learning outcomes for all children under the influence of international efforts, including the "Education for All" campaign promoted by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2020). While Nepal has come a long way in the field of education, numerous children from

disadvantaged backgrounds are still deprived of equal access, participation and learning opportunities. The Government of Nepal has introduced the Consolidated Equity Strategy (2014) which outlines the principles for addressing inequity and inclusion in education through targeted support, in order to lessen these inequities.

Since 1951, Nepal has achieved remarkable success in the field of education, partly due to the policies of Compulsory and Free Education Act (2018) and School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032). The education sector has expanded in all levels and the number of private schools in the country has also increased, enrolling more than 30% of students at basic and secondary levels according to the 2021 Nepal Population and Housing Census (NPHC). But the inequalities in access and quality persist, especially for those in disadvantaged circumstances (National Statistics Office, 2025).

There are still educational inequalities at the province, caste, gender and wealth levels. Approx. 770,000 children (10%) in the age group 5–17 years are out-of-school, with Madhesh Province having more than 60% of the children out of school. The poorest children make up 45% of never enrolled children and Madheshi Dalits and religious and language minorities remain the most marginalized. While the years of schooling have risen, there are inequalities with respect to caste and wealth (National Statistics Office, 2025).

The overall literacy rate in Nepal is 76.2% of which males are 83.6% and females 69.4%. Child literacy is nearly 100%, with significant gains in closing the gender gap among young people. The disparity is, however, large among the provinces as literacy is around 95% in Bagmati and Gandaki, but only about 66% in Madhesh. Moreover, adults with intellectual disabilities have the lowest literacy rates, underscoring a need for more inclusive education policies (National Statistics Office, 2025).

From the perspective of inclusive education, the development of inclusive education could be looked through four lenses, namely the rights-based approach, the approach focusing on children with special needs, the approach focusing on the educational inclusion of the marginalized and disadvantaged groups and the approach focusing on the transformative approach for restructuring the entire education system to address the needs of all learners (Yadav et al., 2025). These views have been captured in the Nepalese policies, plans and programmes of education on various occasions. In particular, the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) and the National Education Policy (Grimes et al., 2021; MoEST, 2019) have stressed on establishing an inclusive education system for learners with a variety of background. So, the changing social value, increasing awareness about human rights and the idea of inclusive development have been instrumental in the development and growth of inclusive education in Nepal.

Although Nepal has established inclusive education in the form of policies like the School Sector Development Plan, Nepal National Education Policy, and School Education Sector Plan, there are problems to overcome when it comes to implementation. Studies have shown that there is still work to be done in terms of meaningful participation of students with disability and other marginalized groups. There remain challenges to effective implementation, including teachers' limited knowledge, skills, and professional preparation; the lack of assistive technologies; physical facilities that are inaccessible; and limited resources. Likewise, women are not well represented in school governance as there are persistent structural barriers (Adhikari and Adhikari, 2021; CERID, 2004, quoted in Shahi, 2022; MoE, 2016).

The current inclusive education discourse in Nepal is still mainly focussed on children with disabilities. At a more holistic level, however, inclusion seeks to provide equal opportunities for participation for all children affected by ethnicity, language, gender, socio-economic status, geographical remoteness and other forms of diversity. Thus, inclusive education cannot be seen as an education programme for disability but as an overall education reform based on social justice, equality and respect for diversity. In the case of Dalit students, Pasa and Bishwokarma (2020) highlights various issues such as bullying, negative labelling and unequal treatment experiencing by Dalit children in community schools and suggested to apply 5Es model which involves envision, educate, empower, ensure and encourage Dalit communities to educational and social mainstreaming. Pasa and Bishwokarma (2022) also suggested to implement small and low cost project such as goat support project in local context that is important for ensuring educational continuity for learners from economically back warded family.

Besides, the creation of a truly inclusive society will not be achieved if the education system continues to create unequal tracks according to ability, language, ethnicity, social class, and so on. Therefore, to make inclusive education work in Nepal, improving teachers' capacity, building inclusive learning environments, developing inclusive curricula, engaging parents and building community based support systems are of utmost importance. The national and international goals of "quality, inclusive, and equitable education for all" can only be accomplished through these concerted efforts.

The concept of inclusive education has evolved into a global educational vision and objective that seeks to ensure equal opportunities for learning for all. The historical perspective of this article illustrates the evolution of inclusive education from segregated special education to integration and finally to a broader inclusive system based on the principles of human rights, social justice and equity. One of the interesting findings of this study was that inclusive education is not just about learners with disabilities being included but it is about all kinds of diversity in regard to learners, that is, linguistic, cultural, socio-economic and geographical. This is in line with UNESCO's (2009, 2020) definition of inclusive education as an ongoing process to build up

education systems for learner diversity. However, the analysis also shows that there is an existing policy-practice mismatch, particularly in developing nations such as Nepal.

Although Nepal has made good policy strides with the Constitution (2015) and School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032), in practice there are structural and pedagogical barriers that inhibit the application of inclusive education. These include inadequate teacher training, limited assistive technology, inadequate infrastructure and entrenched societal attitudes based on the medical model of disability. Inclusive education is mainly perceived as special education instead of a comprehensive system-wide change, as indicated in the manuscript.

Conclusion and Implication

In Nepal, inclusive education has shifted from the traditional concept of special education to an inclusive, equity and diversity based approach to the right to education for all. Though Nepal has formulated a few policies and has the intention of promoting inclusion, there are certain impediments in the implementation of it. Social barriers, inaccessible infrastructure, lack of resources and limited teacher capacity remain challenges to the effective implementation. For inclusive education to be possible, therefore, there must be system change, increased support systems and community-wide collaboration between governments, schools and communities so that all learners have the opportunity to learn. The study highlights the importance to move beyond segregation and integration into systemic transformation in line with the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996). This includes changes to curricula, professional development of teachers, school leadership development, and community involvement. Failure to make these changes means that inclusive education could just be a theoretical construct, not a reality. Besides, inclusive education should be understood as a dynamic and continuous process, which requires constant commitment from the government, teachers and communities. The idea of “education for all” can only be realised through persistent structural changes that are based on equity and respect for diversity

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