

Exploring the Lives of Children with Special Needs in Lunglei Town: Challenges and Opportunities

Authors Ronald Lalremsiama Ralte
MA IV Semester
Department of Education, ICFAI University, Mizoram
Durtlang North, Aizawl

Dr. Vanlalalwmkimi
Assistant Professor, Department of Education, ICFAI
University, Mizoram

H. Juliana . Khongsai
MA IV Semester
Department of Education, ICFAI University, Mizoram
Durtlang North, Aizawl

Dr. Gloria Lalchhanhimi
Assistant Professor, Department of Education,
ICFAI University, Mizoram

Dr. Henry V.L Nghilhlova Zote
Assistant Professor, Department of Education, ICFAI
University, Mizoram

Dr. C.Lalremmawii
Assistant Professor, Department of Edeucation, ICFAI
University, Mizoram

Abstract— Inclusive education is a pivotal approach in modern educational systems, aiming to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, including those with special needs. Quantitative research was employed covering all the schools in Lunglei town. This study delves into the current state, and of inclusive education practices in schools of Lunglei town. The research highlights the critical role of teacher training, community awareness campaigns, curriculum reforms, recruitment of specialized staff, investment in assistive technology, infrastructure upgrades, and accessible infrastructure. While there is a strong policy framework for inclusive education, practical implementation remains challenging. Despite these challenges, the study underscores the importance of inclusive education in enhancing social integration and academic outcomes for all students. By examining the complexities of inclusive education, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue on how to create truly inclusive educational environments that support the diverse needs of all learners.

Keywords— Inclusive education; CWSN; Challenges; Oppourtunities; education

I. INTRODUCTION

In the initial part of a research, it is imperative to have a clear understanding about definition and concepts of the topic to ensure a fair and accurate analysis. Therefore, in this section, we will be looking into various definitions put forwarded by various educators and experts to form a proper conception about inclusive education.

To understand the word "inclusive", it is crucial to firstly understand the term "inclusion". The word "inclusion" originates from the Latin word "includere" which etymologically means "to shut in, enclose, or confine", Oxford Dictionary, (n.d.). Over time, the meaning of inclusion has evolved to a new meaning. Baldwin, (2023) defines inclusion as an environment where everyone is respected, valued and has equal opportunities, regardless of their background or identity. The word "inclusion" has evolved from a narrow meaning of confinement to a broader meaning of integration of all children by embracing diversities and equal opportunities.

Inclusive education is the integration of children with disabilities into regular schools, ensuring they receive the necessary facilities and diverse support to experience equity and obtain the quality education they deserve. Ofori, (2018). According to UNICEF (2022) Inclusive education means integrating all children into the same classrooms and schools. It provides genuine learning opportunities for traditionally excluded groups, including children with disabilities and speakers of minority languages.

Inclusive Education is described as the process of meeting the different needs of all learners by removing all barriers to and within the learning environment. Inclusive Education entails enabling schools to serve all children and establishing schools that welcome all students, regardless of their traits, disadvantages, or difficulties. Inclusive Education is based on the notion that people with disabilities should not have to rely solely on specialized services to benefit from educational materials, activities, and practices that are otherwise available to everyone. (UNICEF, 2017).

Based on the above stated definitions it can be observed that Inclusive education is a transformative approach that emphasizes the participation of all students into mainstream classrooms regardless of their disabilities, backgrounds, colour, caste, gender, needs etc. It can also be seen that inclusive education lays emphasis in letting the educational systems adapt in accordance with the convenience of learners to meet their diverse needs, rather than letting them conform into existing structures.

II. DEFINITIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

UNESCO (1994) – “Inclusive education involves changes to content, approaches, structures, and strategies. It is based on the idea that the regular system is responsible for educating all children”.

UNICEF (2017) defines inclusive education as a system that ensures all children, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or other characteristics, can learn together in the same environment. It emphasizes eliminating barriers to participation and learning for marginalized groups and fostering equality and respect for diversity.

Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti (2010) describe inclusive education as placing all students, including those with disabilities, in age-appropriate general education classrooms within their local schools. The focus is on providing high-quality instruction and support to help all students succeed in the core curriculum.

Alqurainik & Gut (2012) highlight that inclusive education operates on the principle that students with disabilities are as competent as their peers without disabilities. It aims to provide education in the least restrictive environment (LRE), ensuring that students are included in general education settings as much as possible.

Savage & Erten (2015) emphasize that inclusive education involves adapting teaching methods and classroom environments to accommodate diverse learners. This includes using varied instructional methods like project-based learning and differentiated instruction to meet individual needs.

Tandfonline Study (2021) argues that inclusive education is not just about physical inclusion but also about fostering a sense of belonging and participation for all students within the school community. It stresses the importance of systemic changes to achieve this goal.

From the above stated definitions, it is apparent that the definitions altogether are attempting to interpret the same message. They strive to elucidate the core principle of inclusive education which is the inclusion of all students regardless of their diverse abilities or challenges, providing equal access to quality education within mainstream settings. Collectively, they emphasize on social integration, equal access to quality education, and enhancing educational outcomes. And lastly, they laid huge stress on fostering a more inclusive society where all disabled children are openly welcomed, where they can be assisted towards reaching their full potential.

III. HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In India, inclusive education has evolved significantly since the late 19th century. The journey began in the 1880s with the establishment of special schools for the deaf NIOS, (2023). Later in 1966 when the Kothari Commission highlighted the crucial importance of educating children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Kothari Commission, (1966). This marks a significant evolution of the meaning of Inclusive Education from segregation to integration. Additionally, in 1974, The Integrated Education for Handicapped Children (IEDC) Program was launched, this marked a pivotal step towards inclusion. It sought to provide educational opportunities for children with special needs within mainstream schools. Ministry of Education (1974).

Subsequently, Government initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), and the Right to Education were introduced. Ministry of Human Resource Development, (2001). They provide numerous supports, including identification and assessment of CWSN, assistive devices, corrective surgeries, accessible learning materials, uniforms, and therapeutic services. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, (n.d.)

The UNESCO adopted The Salamanca Statement on Inclusion in Education in the year 1994. There has been a gradual change since its adoption. An increasing number of stakeholders—educators, policymakers, parents, and communities are recognizing the importance of inclusive education in fostering diversity, equity, and social cohesion. Also, many had enacted and implemented laws and policies to support Inclusive Education. UNESCO (2024)

Pertinently, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights the significance of equity and inclusivity in education. It aims to provide fair education for all, particularly targeting marginalized groups such as girls and children with disabilities. Ahmad, (2024)

In Mizoram, inclusive education had been introduced and enforced, albeit with mixed results. With the implementation of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2001, whose principle is the universalization of elementary education, Mizoram has made steady progress in the area of Inclusive Education. Strenuous efforts have been made towards the identification and education of disabled children by introducing a zero-rejection policy on school admission, appointing coordinators for Inclusive Education, and training Resource teachers and Cluster volunteers. In 2018, the Government of India established Samagra Shiksha, a new plan that includes SSA, Rastriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education (TE), which was also implemented in Mizoram. Institutional improvements are required to effectively meet the requirements of students with impairments. However, the effectiveness of Inclusive Education appears to be heavily reliant on the competency and active participation of teachers. The teacher's perspective, behaviour, gender, and specialized teaching approaches all play an important role in determining whether the integration process is successful or not. Fanai (2022).

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

According to Shrivastava, (2024) Inclusive education fosters empathy, respect, and understanding among students of all abilities and improves academic outcomes by providing individualized support. Its significance lies in preparing students for a diverse society, equipping them with essential skills and perspectives for a more inclusive community. Moreover, Inclusive education fosters empathy, tolerance, and collaboration by bringing together students of diverse abilities and backgrounds, creating a more accepting and equitable society (University of Bolton 2024)

The Inclusive Educational Approach supports all students by fostering a variety of teaching and learning modalities. It enriches and engages students' educational experiences while teaching them to understand other points of view. Inclusive education prepares students to handle social difficulties and thrive in various situations by reflecting societal diversity in classrooms (Portobello Institute, n.d.; Light for the World International, n.d.). Inclusiveness in education is very crucial as it promotes equality, integration, social justice, and embrace diversity in educational settings. Inclusiveness takes steps towards the elimination of discrimination, injustice, inequality, negative attitude that exist within education setting. Inclusive Education removes all types of discrimination within the learning environment, providing equal access and fostering the best outcomes for everyone Gayatri Swain & Dibakar Sarangi, (2024). It aims to integrate all children into mainstream classrooms and without neglecting their disabilities. Inclusive education considers individual differences and uniqueness of every child, provides treatment, and adjust teaching strategies according to their individual needs.

V. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the challenges faced by Children with Special Needs in schools of Lunglei Town?
2. To identify the resources and support system which are available for Children with Special Needs in schools of Lunglei Town?
3. To suggest solution for challenges encountered by Children with Special Needs in schools of Lunglei Town.

VI. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Descriptive survey which is cross sectional design approach to gather and analyse data, providing a numerical representation of the phenomena under investigation. The population of this study consists of all schools in Lunglei town, encompassing both private and government institutions. To draw a representative sample, purposive sampling was used to select schools that have admitted Children with Special Needs (CWSNs), allowing for a focused examination of the specific context and experiences related to CWSNs. The primary tool for data collection was a closed-ended questionnaire developed by the researcher, designed to gather specific, structured data that aligns with the research objectives.

The data collected was analysed using SPSS, statistical methods, to identify patterns, trends, relevant to the research objectives. The study adheres to ethical standards by ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, obtaining informed consent before data collection, and handling data in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

VII. RESULTS

Objective 1: To identify the challenges faced by Children with Special Needs in schools of Lunglei Town?

Sr. no	ITEMS	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
1	I encounter resistance from other staff regarding the inclusion of children with special needs in regular classroom.	3(5%)	17(29%)	8(14%)	22(38%)	8(14%)	58(100%)
2	Sometimes it is difficult to balance the needs of children with special needs and those of another student in my classroom.	7(12%)	22(38%)	13(22%)	14(24%)	2(2%)	58(100%)
3	There is a lack of awareness about the importance of inclusive education among the wider school community.	4(7%)	16(28%)	23(40%)	14(24%)	1(2%)	58(100%)
4	I feel supported by school leadership in implementing inclusive practices.	10(17%)	36(62%)	11(19%)	2(2%)	0(0%)	58(100%)
5	The teacher received sufficient training on how to handle behavioral challenges posed by CWSN.	4(7%)	20(34%)	5(9%)	23(40%)	6(10%)	58(100%)

1. The item "I encounter resistance from other staff regarding the inclusion of children with special needs in regular classroom" shows that 38% of respondents Disagree with this statement, while 14% Strongly Agree and 29% Agree. This indicates a mixed response, suggesting that while some teachers face resistance, others do not experience it as significantly.
2. The statement "Sometimes it is difficult to balance the needs of children with special needs and those of other students in my classroom" reveals that 38% of respondents Agree, and 24% Disagree. This suggests that a significant portion of educators find it challenging to balance these needs.
3. The item "There is a lack of awareness about the importance of inclusive education among the wider school community" shows that 40% of respondents are Neutral, indicating a lack of strong opinions on this matter. However, 28% Agree and 24% Disagree, suggesting some awareness but also a need for improvement.
4. The statement "I feel supported by school leadership in implementing inclusive practices" indicates strong support, with 62% of respondents Agreeing and only 2% Disagreeing. This suggests that school leadership is generally supportive of inclusive practices.
5. The item "The teacher received sufficient training on how to handle behavioural challenges posed by CWSN" shows that 40% of respondents Disagree, while 34% Agree. This highlights a need for more comprehensive training in this area.

Objectives 2: To identify the resources and support system which are available for Children with Special Needs in schools of Lunglei Town.

Sr. no	ITEMS	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
1	My school has a clear policy promoting inclusive education for children with special needs	20(34%)	32(55%)	6(10%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	58(100%)
2	The current curriculum is adaptable to meet the needs of children with special needs	11(19%)	27(47%)	18(31%)	2(3%)	0(0%)	58(100%)
3	There are enough special educational professionals (e.g., resource teachers, counsellor) in my school to support children with special needs.	8(14%)	10(17%)	12(21%)	25(43%)	3(5%)	58(100%)
4	The school infrastructure is accessible for children with special needs	4(7%)	32(55%)	14(24%)	8(14%)	0(0%)	58(100%)
5	There is access to technology and assistive devices that can help support learning for children with special needs	2(3%)	16(28%)	17(29%)	21(36%)	2(3%)	58(100%)
6	There should be a clear policy in your school to promote inclusive education for children with special needs	15(26%)	29(50%)	7(12%)	7(12%)	0(0%)	58(100%)
7	The teacher receives enough time to plan and prepare inclusive lessons that cater to children with special needs	9(15%)	27(47%)	8(14%)	14(24%)	0(0%)	58(100%)

1. The item "My school has a clear policy promoting inclusive education for children with special needs" shows that 89% of respondents either Strongly Agree or Agree with this statement. This indicates a strong foundation for promoting inclusive practices within schools.
2. The statement "The current curriculum is adaptable to meet the needs of children with special needs" reveals that 66% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree, while 31% are Neutral. This suggests that while there is some flexibility in the curriculum, there is room for improvement to better meet diverse needs.
3. The item "There are enough special educational professionals (e.g., resource teachers, counsellor) in my school to support children with special needs" highlights a significant concern. Only 31% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree, while 48% Disagree or Strongly Disagree. This indicates a shortage of specialized support staff, which is crucial for effective inclusion.

4. The statement "The school infrastructure is accessible for children with special needs" shows that 62% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree, while 14% Disagree. This suggests that while progress has been made in making infrastructure accessible, further improvements are needed.
5. The item "There is access to technology and assistive devices that can help support learning for children with special needs" reveals that only 31% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree, while 39% Disagree or Strongly Disagree. This highlights a significant gap in providing necessary tools for inclusive learning.
6. The statement "There should be a clear policy in your school to promote inclusive education for children with special needs" indicates that 76% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree with this necessity. This reinforces the importance of having a clear policy framework for inclusive education.
7. The item "The teacher receives enough time to plan and prepare inclusive lessons that cater to children with special needs" shows that 62% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree, while 24% Disagree. This suggests that while many educators feel supported in planning inclusive lessons, some face challenges in terms of time allocation.

VIII. DISSCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The findings from the survey provide a comprehensive insight into the challenges and opportunities within the context of inclusive education. One of the significant challenges highlighted is the resistance encountered by educators when attempting to integrate children with special needs into regular classrooms. While 38% of respondents Disagree with the statement, indicating that they do not face significant resistance, a substantial 29% Agree and 14% Strongly Agree, suggesting that resistance remains a notable barrier for many. This mixed response underscores the need for strategies to address and mitigate such resistance, possibly through increased awareness and training for staff members.

Another critical issue is the difficulty in balancing the needs of children with special needs alongside those of other students. A substantial 38% of respondents Agree that this is a challenge, while 24% Disagree. This indicates that educators are grappling with how to ensure that all students receive appropriate attention and support. This challenge is multifaceted, involving not only pedagogical strategies but also resource allocation and support systems within schools. Addressing this issue effectively could involve providing educators with additional resources and training on differentiated instruction and inclusive teaching practices.

The survey also reveals a mixed perception regarding awareness about the importance of inclusive education among the wider school community. While 40% of respondents are Neutral, 28% Agree that there is a lack of awareness, and 24% Disagree. This suggests that while some progress has been made in promoting inclusive education, there is still a need for increased awareness and advocacy to ensure that the entire school community understands and supports inclusive practices. This could involve workshops, seminars, and community engagement initiatives aimed at fostering a culture of inclusivity.

On a more positive note, the survey indicates strong support from school leadership for implementing inclusive practices. A significant 62% of respondents Agree that they feel supported by school leadership, with only 2% Disagreeing. This level of support is crucial for creating an environment where inclusive practices can thrive. It suggests that schools are committed to providing the necessary resources and backing for educators to implement inclusive strategies effectively.

However, despite this support, there is a clear need for more comprehensive training on handling behavioural challenges posed by children with special needs. A substantial 40% of respondents Disagree that they have received sufficient training, while 34% Agree. This disparity highlights the importance of providing educators with specialized training to manage diverse classroom behaviours effectively. Such training would not only enhance the educators' confidence but also improve the learning environment for all students.

The findings from the survey also provide a detailed insight into the current state of inclusive education within schools, highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses in this area. One of the positive aspects is the presence of a clear policy promoting inclusive education for children with special needs. A significant 89% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that their school has such a policy, indicating a strong foundational support for inclusive practices. This suggests that schools are actively working towards creating an environment that supports the integration of children with special needs. However, the fact that 76% of respondents also believe that there should be a clear policy in place underscores the ongoing need for these policies to be robust and effectively implemented.

Another area of focus is the adaptability of the curriculum to meet the needs of children with special needs. While 66% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that the current curriculum is adaptable, 31% remain Neutral. This neutrality could indicate a lack of clear understanding or implementation of adaptable curricula, suggesting that schools might benefit from further guidance or resources to enhance curriculum flexibility. This adaptability is crucial for ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, can engage effectively with the educational content.

However, a significant challenge highlighted by the survey is the availability of special educational professionals. Only 31% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that there are enough professionals, such as resource teachers and counsellors, to support children with special needs. A substantial 48% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, indicating a critical shortage of specialized support staff. This shortage can severely impact the ability of schools to provide adequate support to children with special needs, emphasizing the need for increased recruitment and training of these professionals.

The accessibility of school infrastructure is another important aspect of inclusive education. While 62% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that the infrastructure is accessible, 14% Disagree. This suggests that while progress has been made, there is still a need for further improvements to ensure that all physical barriers are removed, allowing children with special needs to fully participate in school activities.

The availability of technology and assistive devices is also a critical factor in supporting inclusive learning. However, only 31% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that such resources are available, while 39% Disagree or Strongly Disagree. This significant gap highlights the need for schools to invest in technology and assistive devices that can aid in the learning process for children with special needs, ensuring they have equal opportunities to engage with educational content.

Lastly, the survey indicates that teachers generally feel supported in planning inclusive lessons, with 62% of respondents Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing that they receive enough time for this purpose. However, 24% Disagree, suggesting that some educators face challenges in terms of time allocation. Ensuring that all teachers have sufficient time to prepare inclusive lessons is essential for maintaining a high standard of education for all students.

In conclusion, while schools have made progress in establishing policies and frameworks for inclusive education, significant challenges remain. While there are areas of strength, such as leadership support, there are also significant challenges related to resistance, balancing student needs, awareness, training, shortage of special educational professionals, and assistive devices still exist.

IX. CONCLUSION

Inclusive education aims to integrate children with diverse needs into mainstream classrooms, promoting equity and social inclusion. However, this research highlights several challenges that hinder its effective implementation including the lack of understanding about inclusive education principles, teacher's struggle to balance the needs of children with special needs alongside other students due to inflexible curricula and limited teaching strategies, shortage of special educational professionals, a lack of awareness among the wider school community about the importance of inclusive education etc. Despite these challenges, there are areas of excellence that provide a foundation for improvement. These strengths can be leveraged to address existing gaps through targeted interventions such as teacher training, community awareness campaigns, curriculum reforms, recruitment of specialized staff, investment in technology, and infrastructure upgrades.

Moreover, it is hoped that the findings of this research will be an eye opener for policymakers, administrators, educators and curriculum framers by providing information with regards to the current scenario and future possibilities of Inclusive Education in Lunglei town as it reveals areas that needs further investigation for improvement. It is expected that the outcome will provide valuable insights and assist to gain deep understanding about the challenges that hindered the implementation of inclusive education. Ultimately, it is anticipated that the findings of this research will acquaint parents and educators about the best inclusive educational practises and highlight the roles of each stakeholder and their obligations for the successfulness of inclusive education in Mizoram.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Inclusive education faces several challenges, including a lack of understanding among teachers and limited community awareness. To improve this, professional development workshops can be organized to enhance teachers' skills in implementing inclusive practices. Additionally, community engagement initiatives such as seminars and awareness campaigns can be developed to educate parents and the broader community about the benefits of inclusive education. These efforts can help foster a supportive environment for inclusive education.
2. Another critical issue is the lack of training for handling behavioural challenges posed by children with special needs. To address this, specialized training programs can be implemented to equip teachers with strategies for positive behavioural interventions and supports (PBIS). Furthermore, collaboration with behavioural specialists can provide ongoing support to educators, helping them manage diverse classroom behaviours effectively. Peer support networks can also be established to encourage teachers to share strategies and experiences in managing behavioural challenges.
3. The curriculum's adaptability and flexibility are also crucial for inclusive education. To enhance this, a curriculum review and revision should be conducted to identify areas that can be adapted to meet diverse learning needs. Differentiated instruction training can be offered to help teachers tailor their teaching methods to individual student needs. Moreover, technology integration can be leveraged to provide flexible learning pathways and personalized educational experiences, making the curriculum more accessible to all students.

4. The shortage of support professionals, such as resource teachers and counsellors, is another significant challenge. To address this, targeted recruitment strategies can be developed to attract more special education professionals. Internship programs for students pursuing special education degrees can provide them with hands-on experience and encourage them to join the field. Additionally, ongoing professional development opportunities should be offered to retain existing support staff and enhance their skills.
5. Investing in technology and assistive devices is also essential for inclusive education. Government & Schools should allocate a specific budget for purchasing these tools and provide technology training for teachers to effectively integrate them into their teaching practices.
6. Lastly, improving the accessibility of school infrastructure is vital. A thorough infrastructure assessment should be conducted to identify areas that need improvement for accessibility. Renovation plans can then be developed and implemented to ensure that all facilities are accessible to children with special needs. Furthermore, accessibility standards should be strictly adhered to in all new constructions to prevent future barriers.

By implementing these strategies, schools can effectively address the loopholes in inclusive education and create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

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