

Peer Acceptance and Social Integration of Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Inclusive Schools

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Abstract: While legislative frameworks mandate inclusive education, children with intellectual disabilities (ID) frequently encounter social exclusion and limited peer relationships despite physical co-location. This study investigates the peer acceptance and social integration of children with ID within inclusive educational settings in Kerala ($N = 55$ educational practitioners). Utilizing a descriptive cross-sectional survey design and the Inclusive Social Integration Scale (ISIS), descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted. Findings reveal that while structured academic group tasks receive moderate inclusion ratings ($\text{Mean} = 3.27$), unstructured periods such as recess, lunch breaks, and playground games represent significant social bottlenecks ($\text{Mean} = 3.00$). Furthermore, teachers report severe time constraints regarding curriculum completion versus fostering socio-emotional bonds ($\text{Mean} = 2.49$). One-way ANOVA tests evaluating school management types and professional experience levels indicated no statistically significant variance across institutional categories ($F = 0.557, p = 0.576$). The results emphasize the necessity for targeted peer-mediated intervention modules and teacher training to bridge the gap between physical enrollment and genuine social inclusion.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Intellectual Disabilities, Peer Acceptance, Social Integration, Educational Practitioners, Socio-Emotional Learning

1. Introduction

The transition from segregated special education to inclusive learning ecosystems represents a vital step toward social justice and equitable human development. Inclusive education is designed to cater to diverse learning needs while minimizing exclusion. However, within the Indian context—guided by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—a significant gap persists between structural enrollment numbers and functional social integration.

Grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and the Social Model of Disability, this study addresses the "playground gap" and frontline systemic barriers in Kerala schools. While physical infrastructure and formal academic access have improved, children with intellectual disabilities often remain socially isolated during unstructured intervals like lunch breaks and recess. General education teachers experience intense pressure to complete rigid academic curricula within tight timelines, limiting their ability to intentionally cultivate peer acceptance.

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To assess the extent of active peer acceptance and voluntary social integration of children with ID across regular academic and unstructured settings.
- 2) To identify primary professional, institutional, and curriculum-related constraints restricting educators from facilitating socio-emotional peer networks.
- 3) To examine the role of institutional variables, such as school management support, in fostering inclusive community values.

2. Methodology

- **Research Design:** Descriptive cross-sectional survey research design.
- **Sample Population ($N = 55$):** Active educational

practitioners in Kerala, comprising General Education Teachers (69.09%), Special Educators (23.64%), School Principals (5.45%), and Counselors (1.82%).

- **Sampling Technique:** Purposive sampling.
- **School Management Breakdown:** Aided schools (56.36%), Government schools (25.45%), and Private/Unaided schools (18.18%).
- **Research Tool:** The Inclusive Social Integration Scale (ISIS), a 15-item standardized rating scale evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ($1 = \text{Strongly Disagree}$, $5 = \text{Strongly Agree}$), capturing peer interaction dynamics, teacher efficacy, curriculum constraints, and institutional backing.
- **Statistical Analysis:** Descriptive statistics (Mean, Median, Standard Deviation) and inferential statistics (One-Way ANOVA) processed via APA 7th edition standards.

3. Results and Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics of ISIS Items (Selected Highlights)

- **Active Inclusion in Academic Tasks (Q1):** $\text{Mean} = 3.27$, $\text{SD} = 1.19$
- **Natural Conversations & Peer Initiation (Q3):** $\text{Mean} = 3.49$, $\text{SD} = 1.07$
- **Lunch Breaks & Recess Socialization (Q5):** $\text{Mean} = 3.00$, $\text{SD} = 1.22$ (Identified as a major social bottleneck)
- **Sufficient Teacher Time Alongside Curriculum (Q11):** $\text{Mean} = 2.49$, $\text{SD} = 1.00$ (Lowest scoring item across the entire scale)

Hypothesis Testing via One-Way ANOVA

- **Hypothesis 1 (H_1):** Tested whether perceived integration scores differed across school management types (Government, Aided, Private/Unaided). The ANOVA yielded $F = 0.557, p = 0.576$ ($p > 0.05$). The null hypothesis was accepted, indicating that inclusion barriers

are pervasive across all management sectors in Kerala.

- **Hypothesis 2 (H_2):** Evaluated whether educator teaching experience levels significantly influenced perceived self-efficacy in facilitating socialization. The test yielded $F = 0.698, p = 0.558$, showing no statistically significant variance across experience tiers.

4. Discussion

The empirical findings corroborate previous international studies (e.g., Schwab, 2017; Jones et al., 2021) establishing that physical co-location does not automatically yield psychological acceptance.

- **The Recess Bottleneck:** While adult-monitored academic structures maintain moderate inclusion ($\text{Mean} = 3.27\$$), unstructured playground environments experience a breakdown in peer-mediated support ($\text{Mean} = 3.00\$$).
- **Curricular Pressures:** The critical lack of teacher time ($\text{Mean} = 2.49\$$) forces educators to prioritize standardized testing over socio-emotional learning (SEL).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

While inclusive education has successfully established structural access across Kerala, achieving genuine social integration remains an ongoing challenge. Unstructured playground intervals and curriculum time constraints represent primary barriers to peer acceptance.

Recommendations for IJSR Publication & Practice:

- 1) **Structured Peer Interventions:** Implementation of mandatory "social buddy" and peer-mentorship models during non-academic hours.
- 2) **Curricular Flexibility:** Administrative restructuring to allocate dedicated timetable slots for socio-emotional learning and empathy-building programs.
- 3) **Teacher Training:** Equipping general educators with specialized behavioural management and inclusion strategies.

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