

Special Education System in Kerala: A Review of Policies, Practices, Accessibility and Inclusive Education

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Abstract: Education is a fundamental right, and ensuring meaningful educational participation for children with disabilities is an important component of an inclusive society. Kerala has a comparatively strong educational system, with high literacy, substantial school participation, and an established institutional framework for school education. However, the educational experiences of children with special needs continue to be influenced by challenges related to accessibility, teacher preparedness, specialised support, infrastructure, parental concerns, and continuity of education at higher levels. The present article reviews the special education system in Kerala with particular attention to inclusive education, institutional support, accessibility, teacher preparedness, special educators, parental concerns, and employment opportunities. The study follows a descriptive and analytical document-based design using secondary information obtained from government documents, educational reports, UDISE+-based analyses, General Education Department materials, the State Commissionerate for Persons with Disabilities, planning documents, and relevant news reports. The review indicates that Kerala has developed a policy and institutional foundation for inclusive education, but implementation remains uneven. Available evidence indicates significant enrolment of children with special needs alongside continuing gaps in disability-friendly infrastructure and teacher training. The article highlights the importance of strengthening school accessibility, teacher preparation, specialist support, BRC and cluster-level mechanisms, parent-school collaboration, and continuity of support across educational stages. From a psychological perspective, meaningful inclusion is associated not only with academic access but also with dignity, participation, emotional well-being, communication, and social development.

Keywords: Special Education, Inclusive Education, Kerala, Children with Special Needs, Teacher Preparedness, Accessibility, Special Educators, Educational Psychology

1. Introduction

Education is commonly understood as a fundamental right, but the practical meaning of this right depends on whether educational institutions are capable of recognising individual needs and providing appropriate support. For children with disabilities, access to a school building alone does not necessarily constitute meaningful educational inclusion. Participation, communication, accessibility, appropriate teaching strategies, emotional safety, and opportunities for social interaction are equally important.

Kerala provides an important context for examining these issues because the State has achieved comparatively strong educational outcomes and has an extensive school education system. Nevertheless, children with disabilities continue to encounter barriers related to physical accessibility, learning resources, specialised educational support, teacher preparation, and continuity of schooling. Thus, the presence of children with special needs in mainstream schools should not automatically be interpreted as complete inclusion.

The term special education system in the Kerala context can be understood broadly. It includes special schools and specialised institutions as well as inclusive education mechanisms operating within mainstream schools. These mechanisms involve the General Education Department, SCERT, Samagra Shiksha, Block Resource Centres (BRCs),

Cluster Resource Centres, special educators, resource teachers, therapists, and school-level accommodations.

Available educational data underline the importance of the issue. The project reviewed UDISE+-based information indicating approximately 1.24 lakh Children with Special Needs (CWSN) enrolled in Kerala schools during 2024–25. At the same time, only a proportion of schools had CWSN-friendly toilets and other accessibility facilities. This difference between enrolment and institutional preparedness illustrates that inclusion is a multidimensional process rather than a matter of admission alone.

The issue is also significant from a psychological perspective. School participation can influence self-esteem, peer relationships, communication, emotional security, family stress, and a child's sense of belonging. Therefore, the study of special education should extend beyond administrative arrangements and examine the lived educational environment of children, families, and teachers.

2. Objectives of the Review

- To examine the structure of the special education system in Kerala.
- To understand the roles of SCERT, the General Education Department, BRCs, cluster-level mechanisms, and special educators in inclusive education.

- To analyse available Kerala-based information relating to children with special needs, school accessibility, and teacher preparedness.
- To examine the importance of special schools, special education centres, and school-based support services.
- To discuss parental concerns, teacher responses, and employment opportunities related to special education.
- To suggest measures for strengthening special and inclusive education in Kerala.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present article follows a descriptive and analytical document-based review design. It does not involve primary data collection from children, parents, teachers, or other participants. Instead, the analysis is based on available secondary information concerning special education and inclusive schooling in Kerala.

3.2 Sources of Information

- Kerala Government education and policy documents;
- Kerala State Planning Board reports;
- UDISE+ data and analyses;
- General Education Department materials and government circulars;
- information published by the State Commissionerate for Persons with Disabilities;
- educational and disability-related reports;
- relevant newspaper reports and educational coverage.

3.3 Method of Analysis

The available information was organised thematically around the major dimensions of special education in Kerala. These included educational access, inclusion, infrastructure, administrative support, teacher preparedness, specialist support, parental concerns, and employment. The analysis therefore focuses on identifying patterns, institutional strengths, implementation gaps, and areas requiring further development rather than testing statistical hypotheses.

4. Special Education and Inclusive Education in Kerala

The development of special education in India reflects a broader movement from segregated educational arrangements towards inclusive education. Earlier approaches frequently placed children with disabilities in separate institutions. Contemporary disability and educational frameworks increasingly emphasise the participation of children with disabilities in mainstream educational environments with appropriate support.

In Kerala, inclusive education operates alongside specialised educational institutions and support services. The State's disability-related educational framework emphasises non-discrimination, accessibility, reasonable accommodation, assistive devices, learning materials, communication support, and resource mechanisms.

This creates the basis for understanding special education not simply as education delivered in special schools, but as a continuum of educational support. Some children may benefit from mainstream classrooms with reasonable accommodation, while others may require more intensive specialist intervention or specialised educational environments.

The Kerala State Planning Board has also emphasised coordination among institutions such as SCERT, DIETs, BRCs, and CRCs. Such coordination is important because inclusive education requires more than physical access. Curriculum adaptation, teacher preparation, educational monitoring, and specialist consultation are also necessary.

5. Institutional Structure of Special Education Support

5.1 Role of SCERT

The State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) has an important role in curriculum development, teacher education, pedagogical guidance, and educational research. Within inclusive education, these functions are significant because teachers require practical guidance for responding to diverse learning needs.

Curriculum access for children with disabilities may require differentiated activities, flexible teaching strategies, alternative communication methods, adapted evaluation, and appropriate learning materials. Therefore, academic support institutions have an important role in helping mainstream teachers develop inclusive classroom practices.

5.2 General Education Department

The General Education Department forms the administrative foundation of school education in Kerala. Its responsibilities include educational administration, staffing, school governance, and various matters relating to special schools and teachers.

The existence of administrative arrangements concerning special school teachers indicates that special education forms part of the formal educational structure rather than functioning only as a charitable or welfare activity.

Effective implementation, however, requires coordination between policy decisions and school-level practice. Staffing, infrastructure, teacher deployment, recognition of institutions, and coordination with disability-related programmes all influence the practical functioning of inclusive education.

5.3 BRCs and Cluster-Level Support

Block Resource Centres and cluster-level academic support mechanisms provide an important link between policy and classroom practice. Their potential functions include teacher support, monitoring, resource coordination, follow-up, and local problem-solving.

For special education, local support mechanisms can be particularly important because many ordinary schools do not have specialised personnel available every day. Block- and cluster-level support can therefore assist teachers and schools in identifying needs, coordinating resources, and connecting families with appropriate services.

5.4 Special Schools and Special Education Centres

Kerala's educational landscape includes both mainstream schools and specialised educational institutions. Special schools can provide intensive educational support for children who require highly adapted learning environments, communication-specific instruction, therapeutic support, or specialised teaching.

At the same time, inclusive education principles emphasise that disability should not automatically result in exclusion from mainstream education. Consequently, the central challenge is not necessarily to choose between special schools and inclusive schools. Rather, Kerala requires a flexible continuum of educational support in which the needs of individual children determine the intensity and type of assistance.

5.5 Special Educators and Resource Teachers

Special educators play a central role in translating individual child needs into practical educational support. Their responsibilities may include educational assessment, differentiated instruction, classroom support, coordination with parents and teachers, and assistance in developing appropriate interventions.

The project identifies special educators as important in areas such as autism support, intellectual disability, inclusive classroom assistance, therapy coordination, and family guidance. However, the availability of specialised personnel may not always correspond to the level of need in schools. When specialist support is limited, responsibility may shift disproportionately to classroom teachers and parents.

6. Accessibility and Infrastructure

Physical accessibility is a fundamental component of educational inclusion. A child cannot participate fully in school life if classrooms, toilets, pathways, entrances, and other facilities are inaccessible.

The reviewed UDISE+-based information indicates that Kerala had approximately 1.24 lakh children with special needs enrolled in schools during 2024–25. However, CWSN-friendly toilets were available in only a proportion of schools. One reviewed analysis reported approximately 38.6 percent coverage of CWSN-friendly toilets.

A separate 2025 report reviewed in the project stated that, out of 15,864 schools, 13,029 had ramps, while only 4,504 had CWSN-friendly boys' toilets and 4,102 had CWSN-friendly girls' toilets. The same body of reporting indicated that approximately 68.4 percent of schools had ramps with handrails.

These figures should be interpreted carefully because they come from different reporting periods and sources. Nevertheless, they consistently indicate that physical accessibility is not yet universal.

Accessibility has psychological as well as physical significance. Difficulty in using toilets, moving around a school campus, or reaching classrooms independently can reduce a child's autonomy and dignity. Therefore, accessible infrastructure should be understood as a prerequisite for participation rather than an optional additional facility.

7. Teacher Preparedness and Inclusive Classroom Practice

Teachers are central to the implementation of inclusive education. In a mainstream classroom, the teacher may be required to manage curriculum delivery, assessment, classroom behaviour, emotional needs, parent communication, and multiple learning levels simultaneously.

When children with disabilities are included, teachers may also need to modify activities, repeat or simplify instructions, use visual or other communication supports, differentiate tasks, and collaborate with special educators.

The project reviewed a 2025 report which stated that approximately 39 percent of teachers in Kerala had received training in inclusive education.

This finding highlights an important implementation challenge. Teachers may have a positive attitude towards inclusion but still lack specialised knowledge or practical strategies. Therefore, the challenge should not automatically be interpreted as teacher unwillingness. It may reflect gaps in training, time, specialist support, classroom resources, or institutional backing.

Inclusive education requires teachers to understand that children may differ in communication, attention, learning pace, sensory processing, behaviour, and social participation. Continuous professional development can therefore strengthen teacher confidence and classroom effectiveness.

8. Parents and the Special Education System

Parents are important partners in the education of children with disabilities. They are often the first people to identify developmental or learning concerns and frequently remain the strongest advocates for their children's educational needs.

The reviewed material identifies several concerns relevant to parents, including diagnosis, school admission, classroom acceptance, transportation, communication, therapy support, progress monitoring, and the emotional treatment of the child.

These concerns demonstrate that parents evaluate inclusion not simply by whether their child is admitted to school but by whether the child is understood, respected, supported, and provided with meaningful opportunities to learn.

As children progress into higher grades, parental concerns may increase because academic demands and examination pressures can become more prominent. The reviewed reports also raised concerns about declining participation of children with special needs at higher educational stages.

Therefore, parent-school collaboration should be continuous rather than limited to situations in which problems arise.

9. Teacher Responses and Classroom Reality

The classroom teacher is often the most immediate educational professional interacting with a child with special needs. Teachers may need to balance the requirements of the whole class with the individual needs of particular learners.

Supportive classroom practices may include differentiated learning activities, simplified or repeated instructions, peer support, flexible classroom participation, visual and multisensory learning strategies, individualised attention, collaboration with parents, and coordination with special educators and therapists.

However, such practices become difficult when teachers are responsible for large or diverse classes without adequate specialist support.

The project therefore suggests that inclusive education should be understood as a shared institutional responsibility. The classroom teacher cannot reasonably be expected to address every educational, behavioural, communication, therapeutic, and psychological need independently.

10. Children with Special Needs: Available Data and Major Observations

The reviewed UDISE+-based analysis reported approximately 1.24 lakh CWSN enrolled in Kerala schools during 2024–25. An earlier national data-based reply cited in the project reported 1,38,413 CWSN in Kerala in 2021–22, representing approximately 2.36 percent of total enrolment at that time.

These figures should not be directly treated as a simple longitudinal trend because the datasets come from different reporting periods and may reflect differences in identification, reporting, enrolment, or data methodology.

Nevertheless, they demonstrate that children with special needs constitute a substantial part of Kerala's school population.

The major observations emerging from the document analysis are:

- Kerala has an established policy and institutional foundation for inclusive education.
- A substantial number of children with special needs are enrolled in schools.
- Physical accessibility remains uneven.
- Teacher preparation in inclusive education is incomplete.
- Special educators and resource mechanisms are important for meaningful inclusion.
- Parents continue to face concerns regarding support, acceptance, communication, and continuity.
- The transition from primary to higher educational stages requires greater attention.

- Special education creates professional requirements extending across education, psychology, rehabilitation, therapy, counselling, and related services.

11. Psychological Dimensions of Inclusive Education

11.1 Self-Esteem and Dignity

Children develop a sense of competence and self-worth partly through their experiences in school. Repeated exclusion, humiliation, or inability to participate can negatively influence their sense of belonging. Conversely, supportive educational environments can promote confidence and participation.

11.2 Social Participation

Inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for interaction with peers. Such experiences can contribute to communication, cooperation, friendship formation, and social learning.

11.3 Emotional Well-Being

Children with disabilities may experience frustration when classroom expectations are not appropriately adapted. Teachers who use predictable routines, positive reinforcement, patience, and individualised support can contribute to emotional security.

11.4 Family Stress and Support

Parents of children with disabilities may experience concerns related to diagnosis, education, therapy, transportation, finances, and future independence. Effective school-family collaboration can reduce uncertainty and help families navigate educational systems.

11.5 Teacher Well-Being

Inclusive education can also influence teachers. Without adequate training and institutional support, teachers may experience professional stress and uncertainty. Appropriate specialist collaboration and continuous professional development can help teachers respond more confidently.

12. Employment and Professional Opportunities

The development of inclusive education creates requirements for a range of professionals. These include special educators, therapists, counsellors, resource teachers, shadow teachers, sign-language professionals, Braille-trained personnel, rehabilitation professionals, and support staff.

The project identifies special schools, autism centres, BRC-linked services, private therapy settings, NGOs, and inclusive schools as areas in which specialised professionals may be required.

From a psychology perspective, this creates opportunities for professionals working in child development, counselling, behavioural support, family intervention, educational psychology, and rehabilitation-related services.

However, the existence of potential demand should not be interpreted as evidence of a guaranteed number of vacancies. Future studies should examine actual recruitment patterns, sanctioned posts, qualifications, remuneration, and employment conditions across government and private sectors.

13. Discussion

The evidence reviewed suggests that Kerala's special education system is in a process of transition. The State has moved beyond a model in which disability is addressed primarily through separate institutions. Inclusive education has become an important policy principle, and children with special needs are increasingly recognised within the mainstream school system. However, policy recognition does not automatically result in complete inclusion.

One of the major issues identified in the review is the gap between enrolment and meaningful participation. The presence of children with special needs in school records demonstrates educational access, but it does not by itself establish whether children can move independently, communicate effectively, participate in classroom activities, access learning materials, or receive appropriate emotional and academic support.

Infrastructure is one visible dimension of this gap. The availability of ramps does not necessarily mean that the entire school environment is accessible. Toilets, pathways, classroom arrangements, handrails, communication facilities, and learning materials must also be considered.

Teacher preparedness is another important issue. The reported level of inclusive-education training suggests that many teachers may require additional professional development. Training should move beyond theoretical awareness towards practical classroom strategies.

A further issue is coordination. SCERT, DIETs, BRCs, CRCs, schools, special educators, parents, and other professionals need to work as interconnected parts of a support system. Fragmented services can leave teachers and parents uncertain about where to obtain assistance.

The psychological dimension is particularly important. Inclusion should not be reduced to physical placement. A child may be physically present in a classroom yet remain socially isolated or academically disengaged. Meaningful inclusion therefore involves participation, dignity, communication, emotional safety, and a sense of belonging.

14. Educational and Psychological Implications

- Inclusive education should be implemented as a daily classroom practice rather than treated only as a policy commitment.

- Teacher education and continuous professional development should include practical training in differentiated instruction, classroom accommodation, disability awareness, communication strategies, and behavioural support.
- School infrastructure should move towards universal accessibility. Toilets, ramps, handrails, pathways, classrooms, and learning materials should be evaluated from the perspective of actual usability.
- Specialist support should be strengthened. Special educators, resource teachers, psychologists, therapists, and other professionals can complement the work of classroom teachers.
- Parents should be treated as partners in educational planning and progress monitoring.
- Transition support should receive greater attention. Children may require additional assistance when moving from primary to upper-primary, secondary, and higher educational levels.
- Inclusive education should incorporate psychological well-being. Academic achievement alone cannot be considered the complete measure of educational success for children with disabilities.

15. Limitations

- It is based entirely on secondary information and document analysis.
- No primary interviews or surveys were conducted with children, parents, teachers, or special educators.
- Some statewide personnel figures and exact institutional counts were not available from the sources reviewed.
- Newspaper reports were used for contextual understanding but do not provide the same level of evidence as official administrative datasets.
- Data from different years and reporting systems should not be interpreted as a perfectly comparable longitudinal dataset.
- The article focuses specifically on Kerala and therefore its observations cannot automatically be generalised to all Indian states.

16. Recommendations

- Strengthen inclusive-education training for teachers through regular, practical, classroom-oriented professional development.
- Improve universal accessibility by ensuring disability-friendly toilets, ramps with handrails, accessible pathways, and suitable classroom environments.
- Strengthen special educator availability and establish clearer mechanisms for specialist support in mainstream schools.
- Improve BRC and cluster-level coordination so that teachers receive timely academic and specialist assistance.
- Promote parent-school partnerships through regular communication and collaborative planning.
- Develop stronger transition mechanisms for children moving from primary to secondary education.
- Integrate psychological support into inclusive education through counselling, behavioural support, social-emotional learning, and family guidance.

- Improve data monitoring to understand enrolment, attendance, retention, transition, accessibility, and educational participation of CWSN.
- Expand research at district level to identify differences in infrastructure, staffing, support services, and educational experiences across Kerala.
- Strengthen professional pathways in special education, educational psychology, counselling, therapy, rehabilitation, and related fields.

17. Conclusion

The special education system in Kerala reflects significant progress in recognising the educational rights and needs of children with disabilities. The State has a comparatively strong educational foundation and has developed institutional mechanisms that support inclusive education.

However, the review indicates that important implementation gaps remain. A substantial number of children with special needs are enrolled in schools, while accessibility, teacher preparedness, specialist support, and continuity of education remain uneven.

The central issue is therefore not simply whether children with disabilities have access to schools, but whether they experience meaningful inclusion within those schools.

Meaningful inclusion requires accessible infrastructure, trained teachers, specialist collaboration, supportive families, responsive educational administration, and attention to psychological well-being. The transition from policy commitment to everyday educational practice will determine the effectiveness of Kerala's future special education system.

From a psychological perspective, the ultimate purpose of inclusive education is broader than academic placement. It is to create educational environments in which children with disabilities can learn, communicate, participate, develop relationships, experience dignity, and recognise themselves as valued members of the school community.

Kerala's future progress in special education will therefore depend on strengthening the connection between policy, infrastructure, professional support, classroom practice, family participation, and the psychological well-being of children.

Acknowledgement

The author expresses sincere gratitude to Ms. Evangeline Supriya, Assistant Professor, for her guidance and academic support throughout the preparation of the project and article. The author also acknowledges the academic support provided by the Department of Psychology, Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru.

Declaration

The author declares that this article is based on the author's academic project entitled "Special Education System in Kerala", prepared as part of the M.Sc. Psychology programme at JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru.

The work is based on secondary sources and document analysis. The manuscript has been prepared for academic publication purposes.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

Funding

No specific financial support or external funding was received for this study.

Data Availability

This article is based on publicly available secondary sources, policy documents, educational reports, and published materials reviewed for the academic project. No primary participant-level dataset was generated for this study.

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