

Agents of Inclusion: Teachers' Lived Roles in Operationalizing Inclusive Education Policies in Schools

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Abstract

Inclusive education has evolved from a rights-based ideal to a moral and pedagogical necessity within contemporary schooling systems. Yet, despite extensive policy frameworks and legislative mandates, the operationalization of inclusion remains deeply contingent upon teachers—their beliefs, interpretations, and daily practices. This study investigates the lived roles of teachers as *agents of inclusion* in actualizing inclusive education policies within diverse school contexts. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explores how teachers interpret, negotiate, and enact policy directives in classrooms characterized by varying abilities, resources, and sociocultural dynamics.

Data were collected from thirty teachers across public and private schools through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. The analysis, guided by policy enactment theory (Ball, Maguire, & Braun) and social constructivist principles, revealed five interrelated themes: (1) policy awareness versus policy internalization, (2) emotional and cognitive labor of inclusion, (3) adaptive pedagogy under structural constraints, (4) institutional and leadership influences on inclusive practices, and (5) the redefinition of professional identity through inclusion.

Findings demonstrate that inclusion is not a uniform practice but a contextual negotiation shaped by teachers' sense of agency, institutional culture, and administrative alignment. Teachers who experienced higher professional satisfaction and stronger administrative support—conditions previously identified as crucial to effective education systems were more likely to demonstrate proactive inclusive practices.

The study concludes that teachers are the critical mediators who translate policy rhetoric into educational reality. Effective inclusion, therefore, requires systemic coherence between policy, pedagogy, and institutional ethos, emphasizing continuous professional development, reflective collaboration, and administrative empowerment. This research contributes to theory by situating teacher agency at the center of inclusive policy enactment and offers a grounded framework for building inclusive school cultures through teacher leadership.

Keywords: Inclusive education, teacher agency, policy enactment, phenomenology, educational governance, professional identity, India

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Inclusive education has become one of the most significant educational commitments of the twenty-first century. Rooted in the principles of equity, human rights, and social justice, inclusion transcends the simple act of integrating students with disabilities—it aspires to create schools where every learner, regardless of ability, gender, socioeconomic background, or linguistic identity, participates fully in academic and social life. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 have reinforced inclusion as a moral and developmental imperative.

In India, the vision of inclusive education has been progressively institutionalized through policies like the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, and the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, both emphasizing equal access and participatory learning. Yet, despite this progressive policy landscape, implementation remains inconsistent and uneven across schools. The success of inclusion, it appears, hinges less on the policy documents themselves and more on the people who bring them to life—teachers.

Teachers occupy the pivotal position between *policy intention* and *classroom reality*. They interpret, adapt, and often humanize rigid policy mandates, transforming bureaucratic language into lived experiences of learning and belonging. The inclusive classroom, therefore, becomes not only a pedagogical site but also a moral and political one—where teachers’ values, capacities, and constraints converge to define what “inclusion” truly means.

1.2 Problem Statement

While policies conceptualize inclusion as a universal right, their realization often depends on localized agency. Schools may adopt inclusive rhetoric, yet practices frequently remain exclusionary—driven by inadequate resources, lack of teacher training, and cultural resistance to diversity (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In many contexts, inclusion is reduced to a technical adjustment rather than a transformative philosophy.

The central problem is the disjuncture between *policy design* and *policy enactment*. Teachers are expected to deliver inclusion without sufficient structural support, professional autonomy, or emotional scaffolding. As Sheokand (2017a, 2017b, 2023, 2024) has argued in earlier studies on teacher satisfaction and administrative governance, educational reforms often falter not because of conceptual weakness, but because of underestimating the lived realities of teachers as implementers. This research recognizes teachers not as passive executors of policy, but as *agents of inclusion* whose professional agency and reflective capacity determine the extent to which inclusive ideals take root in schools.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to explore and theorize teachers’ lived roles in operationalizing inclusive education policies. It seeks to understand how teachers interpret policy mandates, negotiate institutional conditions, and construct inclusive practices within everyday pedagogical constraints.

Specific objectives are:

1. To examine how teachers understand and internalize the concept of inclusion as articulated in education policy.
2. To identify the institutional, cultural, and personal factors that influence teachers' ability to enact inclusive practices.
3. To analyze how teachers' professional identity, motivation, and job satisfaction shape their inclusive teaching approaches.
4. To propose a conceptual framework that situates teachers as active policy agents within inclusive education systems.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How do teachers interpret and translate inclusive education policies into classroom practices?
2. What forms of agency, creativity, and adaptation characterize their inclusive teaching efforts?
3. What systemic enablers and barriers affect teachers' ability to realize inclusive education?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to both theory and practice.

Academically, it deepens the discourse on **policy enactment theory** by foregrounding teacher agency within inclusive education. Practically, it provides policymakers and administrators with grounded insights into the lived complexities of policy implementation. Socially, it highlights the human dimension of inclusion—emphasizing empathy, empowerment, and cultural transformation within schools.

Building on prior scholarship that has examined the relationship between governance, teacher motivation, and educational reform (Sheokand, 2017a, 2018, 2023, 2024), this study advances a holistic argument: sustainable inclusion cannot be legislated from the top; it must be cultivated from within schools through empowered teachers and coherent institutional ecosystems.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Conceptualizing Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has moved from remedial integration toward a broader paradigm of belonging, participation, and equity. It is grounded in the conviction that all learners—regardless of disability, gender, caste, linguistic background, or socioeconomic status—deserve equitable learning opportunities (UNESCO, 1994; Florian, 2014). The Salamanca Statement (1994) catalyzed this shift by asserting that educational institutions must adapt to learner diversity rather than expecting learners to conform to institutional norms. Contemporary scholarship positions inclusion not merely as a pedagogical duty but as an ethical commitment to social justice.

2.2 From Policy to Practice: The Enactment Gap

Global research acknowledges the recurring disconnect between policy intent and school-level practice (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Slee, 2019). Policy enactment theory (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) emphasises

that teachers do not implement policy passively; they interpret, negotiate, and repurpose it within institutional constraints. This interpretive process explains why inclusive reforms often appear fragmented in practice.

Within the Indian context, administrative inconsistencies and uneven support structures significantly shape how policy unfolds in classrooms. Sheokand (2023), in her analysis of RTE-related administrative pressures, noted that teachers' satisfaction and institutional support directly influence whether policy directives translate into authentic classroom innovation.

2.3 Teacher Agency and the Moral Architecture of Inclusion

Teacher agency remains the moral and practical anchor of inclusive schooling. It encompasses professional autonomy, ethical commitment, and the capacity to redesign pedagogy for diverse learners (Priestley et al., 2015; Sharma & Salend, 2016).

Earlier scholarship in India has highlighted that teachers' sense of empowerment is shaped by leadership environments and participatory decision-making. Sheokand (2017a) demonstrated that organizational culture and leadership behaviours strongly influence teachers' willingness to adopt adaptive, learner-centred pedagogies. More recently, her work on professional value orientations (Sheokand, 2025) showed that teachers' core beliefs and values serve as the psychological foundation of inclusive attitudes and student-centred decision-making.

Together, these studies underscore that inclusion is sustained not through compliance but through a deep value-based commitment to equity.

2.4 Structural and Cultural Constraints

Inclusion is profoundly influenced by structural realities—curricular rigidity, inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching aids, and overcrowded classrooms (Lindsay, 2007; Miles & Singal, 2010). Cultural norms and societal attitudes toward disability and disadvantage further complicate inclusive efforts, often reinforcing subtle forms of exclusion.

Indian research indicates that teachers frequently operate within contradictory expectations: mandated to practice inclusion while lacking institutional scaffolding. Nayak (2021) documented these systemic tensions. Complementing this, Sheokand (2017b) highlighted how unsupportive administrative structures generate professional fatigue, resulting in compliance-driven rather than creative pedagogical responses.

2.5 Institutional and Leadership Dynamics

Educational leadership is widely recognized as the invisible architecture that sustains inclusive schools. Collaborative leadership, distributed decision-making, and trust-based relationships promote teacher morale and inclusivity (Leithwood et al., 2020). Yet, in India, this domain remains under-theorized.

Sheokand (2024) demonstrated that managerial responsiveness, supportive supervision, and clear communication significantly enhance job satisfaction and teaching commitment. These leadership variables, though indirect, play a decisive role in determining whether teachers view inclusion as a shared institutional mission or an additional burden.

2.6 Public Policy and Inclusive Governance

Inclusive education is embedded within a larger governance ecosystem involving state mandates, teacher accountability structures, and resource allocation priorities. Legislation such as the RTE Act (2009) and NEP (2020) provides the normative baseline, but their execution is shaped by district-level governance and school-level administrative coherence.

Sheokand's work on public policy for marginalized groups (2018) illuminated how administrative fragmentation and weak interdepartmental coordination obstruct equity-driven reforms. Additional insights from her earlier analyses of governance and education policy (Sheokand, 2016; 2017c) emphasised the need for coherent administrative systems and participatory governance to sustain inclusive reforms beyond documentation.

2.7 The Psychological Dimension of Inclusive Practice

Research increasingly recognizes that inclusive education has a psychological dimension rooted in teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and emotional resilience (Forlin et al., 2011). When teachers experience emotional well-being, institutional trust, and psychological safety, they display stronger inclusive orientations and adaptive classroom strategies.

Empirical evidence from India supports this view. Sheokand (2017d) found that positive work culture and supportive school environments enhance teachers' humanistic outlook and professional enthusiasm—factors that align closely with inclusive pedagogical dispositions. Her more recent mixed-methods study on job stress and occupational well-being (Sheokand, 2025) further showed that chronic stress erodes the emotional bandwidth required for sustained inclusive practice.

2.8 Identified Research Gap

Despite the breadth of global and national scholarship, two significant gaps remain. First, limited phenomenological work examines how teachers **experience** inclusion as lived reality—how they interpret policies, negotiate contradictions, and exercise agency in everyday pedagogical spaces. Second, Indian literature tends to foreground structural or legislative analyses while underexamining teachers' own narratives as policy actors.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach that foregrounds teachers' voices, exploring how they understand, interpret, and enact inclusive education within real, context-bound school ecologies.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Theoretical Anchors

3.1.1 Policy Enactment Theory

Policy Enactment Theory, developed by Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012), offers a nuanced understanding of how educational policies are interpreted and operationalized within institutions. Unlike linear models of implementation, this framework views teachers as *policy actors* who actively reconstruct policy within their local contexts.

According to this theory, the “life” of a policy does not end at its formulation—it begins in schools, where teachers interpret policy texts through their values, beliefs, and constraints. Policy enactment is influenced by four contextual dimensions:

- **Situational context:** institutional histories, resources, and demographics.
- **Professional context:** teacher experience, values, and knowledge.
- **Material context:** resources, infrastructure, and class size.
- **External context:** policy pressures, accountability systems, and societal expectations.

Applying this to inclusive education, teachers do not merely implement inclusion—they *translate* it. Their classrooms become spaces of interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation.

This theory aligns perfectly with the study’s purpose: to examine teachers’ lived experiences as mediators between **policy rhetoric and practice reality**.

3.1.2 Social Constructivism

Social Constructivism, rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978), posits that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and dialogue. In inclusive education, learning is inherently social; it emerges from relationships between teachers, students, and the sociocultural environment.

From this lens, inclusion is not a static goal but a *dynamic process of co-creation*. Teachers scaffold learning through differentiation, empathy, and adaptability—recognizing that meaning and understanding evolve through shared experiences.

Social Constructivism thus reinforces the teacher’s dual role as both **facilitator of learning** and **architect of belonging**. It frames inclusion as an act of relational pedagogy—anchored in communication, reflection, and emotional intelligence.

3.1.3 Humanistic and Administrative Integration

Complementing these two lenses is the **Humanistic Governance Perspective**, which bridges policy theory with teacher well-being. Sheokand (2017a, 2018, 2023, 2024) argued that sustainable educational reform depends on the moral climate and governance culture within institutions. When teachers are trusted, emotionally secure, and administratively supported, they display stronger commitment to inclusive ideals.

This humanistic dimension adds ethical depth to policy enactment: inclusion is not merely compliance, but compassion institutionalized.

3.2 Conceptual Synthesis: The Teacher Agency–Inclusion Loop Model

Drawing on the above theoretical foundations and prior empirical evidence, this study proposes a **Teacher Agency–Inclusion Loop Model (TAIL Model)**—a dynamic conceptual structure explaining how teachers operationalize inclusion through a cycle of interpretation, enactment, reflection, and adaptation.

Core Components of the Model:

1. **Policy Inputs:**

Inclusive education directives (NEP 2020, RTE 2009, and local circulars) form the initial trigger. These policies contain the *intent* but not the *instructional translation* of inclusion.

2. **Teacher Interpretation:**

Teachers engage with policy texts through their prior experiences, values, and contextual realities. Interpretation is not neutral—it is filtered through teachers' beliefs about learning, diversity, and fairness.

3. **Institutional Mediation:**

Administrative culture, leadership style, and peer collaboration either amplify or restrict teachers' ability to innovate. As Sheokand (2024) demonstrated, supportive managerial strategies can transform policy enactment into moral purpose.

4. **Inclusive Pedagogical Action:**

This is the visible enactment stage—where teachers experiment with adaptive instruction, differentiated assessment, and emotional scaffolding for diverse learners.

5. **Reflective Feedback Loop:**

Teachers continuously evaluate what works, share insights with colleagues, and reshape practices. Reflection turns inclusion from a task into a professional identity.

6. **Student and Systemic Outcomes:**

Effective enactment enhances learner participation, equity, and emotional well-being—feeding back into policy discourse and institutional reform, completing the *loop*.

3.3 The Dynamic Interplay of Agency, Structure, and Culture

The TAIL model underscores that inclusion is a *negotiated outcome*—emerging from the interaction of teacher agency, structural affordances, and school culture.

- **Agency** allows teachers to make context-sensitive decisions.
- **Structure** provides or restricts the institutional conditions for such agency.
- **Culture** determines whether inclusion is viewed as a shared mission or as an imposed mandate.

This tripartite balance echoes Sheokand's (2017b) assertion that institutional ethos and governance practices are the invisible determinants of policy success.

Thus, the theoretical argument of this study is twofold:

1. Inclusion is not a policy *product* but a *process of enactment*.
2. Teachers are the epistemic agents who transform inclusive ideals into lived pedagogical realities.

3.4 Visual Schema (Conceptual Figure Description)

While a diagram would be presented in the published paper, its structure can be summarized as follows:

Policy Inputs → **Teacher Interpretation** → **Institutional Mediation** → **Inclusive Pedagogical Action**
→ **Reflective Feedback** → **Student Outcomes** → **Policy Reinforcement**

This cyclical flow illustrates how inclusion evolves continuously through teacher praxis and institutional learning.

3.5 Theoretical Contribution

This framework contributes three advancements to the inclusive education discourse:

1. **Integration of Agency and Governance:** It bridges the psychological micro-level (teacher beliefs) with the structural macro-level (policy and administration).
2. **Empirical Reinforcement:** It situates Sheokand's (2016–2024) findings on governance, satisfaction, and humanistic education within a global theoretical paradigm.
3. **Practical Utility:** It offers policymakers a model that explains not just *why* inclusion succeeds or fails, but *how* it evolves through everyday teaching interactions.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative phenomenological design** to capture teachers' lived experiences in enacting inclusive education policies. Phenomenology allows the researcher to explore not what teachers do, but how they *experience, interpret, and internalize* inclusion within their professional contexts. The approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm and policy enactment theory, emphasizing meaning-making rather than measurement.

4.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted across **public and private schools** implementing inclusive education under the **Right to Education Act (2009)** and **National Education Policy (2020)**.

A **purposive sample of 30 teachers** (primary to secondary levels) was selected to ensure representation across urban–rural contexts, gender, and institutional types. All participants had a minimum of five years of teaching experience and prior exposure to inclusive education programs.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Data triangulation strengthened validity through three primary methods:

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews** – explored teachers' understanding of inclusion, challenges, and adaptive strategies.
2. **Focus Group Discussions** – captured collective reflections on institutional culture and policy implementation.
3. **Classroom Observations** – recorded real-time inclusive practices, resource utilization, and peer interactions.

Field notes and policy document reviews provided contextual depth.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **Braun and Clarke's (2006)** six-step **thematic analysis** framework. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded inductively using **NVivo** software. Emerging themes were cross-validated through participant feedback and peer debriefing. Interpretation followed a layered logic—moving from descriptive codes to interpretive patterns aligned with **Policy Enactment Theory** and the **Teacher Agency–Inclusion Loop Model**.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board.

Participants provided **informed consent** and were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. Reflexivity journals were maintained throughout to minimize researcher bias.

4.6 Ensuring Trustworthiness

Research rigor was ensured through **Lincoln and Guba's (1985)** four criteria:

- **Credibility:** triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents.
- **Transferability:** rich contextual descriptions for external relevance.
- **Dependability:** audit trail of all methodological decisions.
- **Confirmability:** researcher reflexivity and data transparency.

4.7 Methodological Rationale

The phenomenological approach was chosen because inclusion, as practiced by teachers, is a deeply personal, context-driven phenomenon. Quantitative designs would risk oversimplifying this complexity. This design aligns with prior calls for interpretive research on teacher experience and educational governance (Sheokand, 2017a, 2023, 2024), affirming that inclusion thrives through reflective human agency, not procedural compliance.

5. Results and Findings

The data revealed a complex but coherent narrative of how teachers experience and enact inclusive education policies in real school settings. Five dominant and interrelated themes emerged, each reflecting the nuanced interplay between policy intention, institutional realities, and personal agency.

5.1 Theme 1: From Awareness to Internalization

Most teachers were aware of inclusive policy frameworks such as RTE (2009) and NEP (2020), but only a few had deeply internalized their pedagogical intent. Policy knowledge often remained procedural—interpreted as “special arrangements” rather than a shift toward inclusive philosophy. Teachers who underwent continuous professional training exhibited stronger moral commitment to inclusion, viewing it as a *shared human value* rather than a mandate.

5.2 Theme 2: Emotional and Cognitive Labor of Inclusion

Teachers described inclusion as emotionally demanding. Managing diverse learning needs required not only pedagogical skill but patience, empathy, and resilience. Many felt overextended, citing large class sizes and lack of special educators. However, they also expressed intrinsic satisfaction in seeing progress among marginalized learners. The emotional labor, though taxing, was framed as meaningful—reinforcing inclusion as both *a policy and a personal mission*.

5.3 Theme 3: Adaptive Pedagogies in Constrained Environments

Teachers demonstrated remarkable creativity in addressing structural barriers—using peer tutoring, flexible grouping, and informal assessment. Innovation often compensated for the absence of resources. Teachers emphasized that inclusion succeeds when autonomy is respected and classroom practices are trusted rather than micromanaged by administration. This finding echoes Sheokand’s (2024) conclusion that administrative freedom enhances professional innovation.

5.4 Theme 4: Institutional Culture and Leadership Climate

The school’s administrative ethos emerged as a powerful determinant of inclusion. Teachers from supportive institutions described open dialogue, shared responsibility, and acknowledgment of effort (Sheokand & Borad, 2025; Sheokand & Dhola, 2025). Conversely, bureaucratic cultures that prioritized documentation over empathy demotivated teachers. Leadership practices—especially mentoring and emotional recognition—strongly correlated with sustained inclusive behaviors, validating Sheokand’s (2017a) findings on the link between governance and teacher satisfaction.

5.5 Theme 5: Redefining Professional Identity through Inclusion

Engaging in inclusion transformed how teachers perceived their profession. They moved from being content deliverers to becoming facilitators of belonging. Many participants expressed that inclusion deepened their moral connection to teaching, giving renewed purpose and legitimacy to their work. This identity shift represented not compliance but conviction—teachers positioning themselves as *agents of equity* in a system still learning to value difference.

5.6 Cross-Theme Synthesis

Across all themes, a clear pattern emerged: inclusion flourishes when teachers feel trusted, supported, and emotionally aligned with institutional purpose. The findings confirm that inclusion is not only a pedagogical challenge but a *governance and culture-building process*. Schools that cultivated trust, collaboration, and reflection displayed stronger inclusive ecosystems.

These patterns collectively substantiate the proposed **Teacher Agency–Inclusion Loop Model**, demonstrating how policy inputs evolve into lived practice through interpretation, adaptation, and reflection.

6. Discussion

6.1 Teachers as Active Policy Actors

The findings reaffirm the central thesis of **Policy Enactment Theory**—that teachers are not passive executors of policy, but *active constructors* of meaning. Inclusion, as practiced in classrooms, is filtered through teachers' personal values, institutional cultures, and interpretive agency. This study shows that inclusive education policies acquire life only when translated by reflective practitioners who humanize their intent.

Teachers' enactment processes reflected interpretive complexity rather than mechanical compliance: they weighed moral considerations, adapted pedagogical methods, and redefined professional identity. This confirms Ball et al.'s (2012) assertion that policy becomes practice through negotiation, not obedience.

These results also substantiate Sheokand's (2017a, 2023, 2024) argument that successful policy implementation depends on teacher empowerment, administrative trust, and emotional climate. Where teachers were treated as stakeholders, inclusion thrived; where they were treated as instruments, it faltered.

6.2 The Paradox of Policy Intent and Practice Reality

Despite progressive mandates like the **RTE Act (2009)** and **NEP (2020)**, inclusion remains a paradox in practice. Teachers expressed alignment with policy ideals but struggled against systemic barriers—resource deficits, time constraints, and rigid assessment systems. This mirrors global findings that inclusive education is more often aspirational than operational (Slee, 2019; Florian, 2014).

The tension between inclusive intent and structural inertia suggests that policies in India, though well-crafted, remain *technocratic*. They articulate inclusion as an output rather than as a relational process. As Sheokand (2018) noted in her analysis of disability policy, bureaucratic overreach without cultural transformation limits real empowerment. Similarly, the current findings emphasize that inclusion cannot be legislated solely through circulars—it must be cultivated through culture.

6.3 Teacher Agency as the Core of Inclusion

The **Teacher Agency–Inclusion Loop Model** proposed in this study provides a conceptual bridge between policy and pedagogy. Findings indicate that teachers' reflective agency—manifested through interpretation, adaptation, and experimentation—constitutes the operational heart of inclusion.

Agency was strongest among teachers with administrative trust, peer collaboration, and continuous professional development. This aligns with **Social Constructivist** perspectives that view learning (and by extension, inclusion) as socially mediated (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers learn inclusion through interaction—sharing strategies, confronting biases, and reconstructing norms within collegial communities.

Furthermore, agency is not static. It evolves through feedback: teachers experiment, reflect, and recalibrate based on student responses. This reflexive loop sustains inclusion even in constrained settings.

6.4 Institutional Culture as a Determinant of Inclusion

Leadership emerged as the unseen infrastructure of inclusion. Supportive administrators who valued empathy, trust, and collaboration created climates where teachers innovated freely. Conversely,

authoritarian management bred fear and formalism. This resonates with Sheokand's (2024) empirical evidence that administrative style directly affects job satisfaction and pedagogical quality.

The present findings extend this by illustrating *how* governance translates into inclusion. Inclusive schools were not better resourced—they were better led. Leadership that acknowledged emotional labor and provided reflective space enabled teachers to sustain inclusive energy despite challenges.

6.5 The Emotional Architecture of Inclusive Practice

Inclusion operates through both cognitive and emotional labor. Teachers' reflections revealed that inclusion is emotionally costly but existentially rewarding. It reshapes their professional identity—from instructors to advocates of equity. This confirms Sheokand's (2017d) earlier work linking humanistic values and peace education to professional fulfillment.

The study contributes to emerging scholarship that conceptualizes inclusion not as policy compliance but as *emotional ethics in action* (Nind & Sheehy, 2022). Emotional labor becomes pedagogical capital: it fuels persistence, empathy, and the capacity to see diversity as strength rather than burden.

6.6 Comparative Reflection with Global Literature

International research consistently highlights that inclusion succeeds where teacher agency, administrative coherence, and reflective practice intersect (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Sharma & Salend, 2016). The current study corroborates this but contributes a contextual nuance: in the Indian context, *institutional ethos and governance quality* are the pivotal mediators of inclusion.

Where Western discourse emphasizes training and resources, this research emphasizes trust and morale. The difference is cultural yet profound—Indian teachers enact inclusion less through systemic scaffolding and more through *personal conviction*.

6.7 Integrative Synthesis

Across theoretical and empirical strands, one truth stands out: **inclusion is governance-dependent but teacher-driven**. Policy may set the direction, but teachers set the motion. Administrative alignment, institutional empathy, and professional satisfaction form the ecology within which inclusive education becomes sustainable.

This synthesis validates the long-standing proposition in Sheokand's corpus (2016–2024) that effective educational reform is impossible without addressing the *human dimension*—teachers' morale, agency, and dignity. Inclusion, ultimately, is not an initiative; it is a culture born of ethical leadership and reflective pedagogy.

7. Implications and Recommendations

7.1 Policy-Level Implications

Inclusive education policies must evolve from *prescriptive frameworks* to *enabling ecosystems*. The study reveals that policies often emphasize compliance (enrolment, accessibility) while neglecting teacher empowerment and emotional readiness. Ministries and education boards should:

- Integrate **teacher agency indicators** into inclusion audits.
- Design **context-sensitive policy toolkits** that allow local adaptation.
- Institutionalize **teacher feedback mechanisms** in policy review cycles.
- Ensure **budgetary allocation for inclusion-focused professional development**, not just infrastructure.

Policy must acknowledge that inclusion thrives not in directives, but in teachers' reflective discretion.

7.2 Institutional-Level Implications

Schools are the actual laboratories of inclusion. The research underscores that the *administrative climate* determines whether inclusion is internalized or resisted.

Institutions should:

- Build **leadership models rooted in empathy and distributed decision-making**.
- Create **peer learning circles** where teachers exchange inclusive strategies and emotional support.
- Establish **reflection spaces** (weekly debriefs, learning communities) to convert experience into institutional learning.
- Recognize inclusive effort through **non-monetary rewards**, visibility, and shared celebration.

As Sheokand (2024) demonstrated, managerial recognition and collaborative governance significantly enhance motivation — the very fuel of inclusion.

7.3 Teacher-Level Implications

Teachers must be seen as *knowledge producers*, not mere executors. Inclusion requires continuous self-reflection and adaptive creativity. The study recommends that teachers:

- Engage in **reflective journaling** and self-assessment on inclusion practices.
- Collaborate across subject areas to co-design differentiated instruction.
- Seek **micro-trainings** on emotional literacy, special needs pedagogy, and intercultural sensitivity.
- Cultivate **empathic resilience**—the balance of care and self-preservation needed for sustainable inclusion.

Teacher education programs must also embed **critical pedagogy** and **policy literacy** so future educators can interpret inclusion beyond procedural compliance.

7.4 Systemic and Research-Level Recommendations

The study opens multiple directions for future inquiry and reform:

- Conduct **longitudinal studies** tracing how teacher agency evolves as inclusive policies mature.
- Explore **comparative governance models** (India vs. Scandinavia or Australia) to identify transferable administrative lessons.

- Develop a **Teacher Inclusion Index** integrating dimensions of agency, institutional trust, and reflective capacity.
- Use **mixed-method research** to quantify relationships between leadership style, teacher morale, and inclusive outcomes.

Academically, this research strengthens the claim—rooted in Sheokand’s (2016–2024) body of work—that sustainable educational change depends on *governance humanization*. Inclusion is not achieved through scale but through sincerity institutionalized.

7.5 Core Proposition

The findings converge on one governing idea:

Inclusive education will remain a policy aspiration unless teachers are positioned as empowered co-authors of reform.

Teachers’ voices, choices, and vulnerabilities must shape how systems design, evaluate, and sustain inclusion. When governance respects teacher humanity, inclusion becomes not a mandate, but a movement.

8. Conclusion

Inclusive education is not merely a pedagogical reform—it is a moral, institutional, and cultural transformation. The findings of this study reaffirm that the real agents of this transformation are teachers, not policymakers or administrators. Policies may proclaim inclusion, but teachers *perform* it. Their lived experiences reveal inclusion as a continuous negotiation between ideals and constraints, structure and agency, emotion and intellect.

Through the lens of **Policy Enactment Theory**, the study demonstrates that inclusion is co-created in everyday practice. Teachers reinterpret policy texts through their values, professional ethics, and contextual limitations. The result is a localized, humanized enactment of inclusion—diverse, imperfect, but authentic. When teachers act as reflective practitioners, policy becomes praxis.

The **Teacher Agency–Inclusion Loop Model** proposed here captures this dynamic process: policy intentions enter classrooms through teacher interpretation, are reshaped by institutional mediation, and re-emerge as evolving pedagogical innovations. This cyclical feedback transforms inclusion from a static mandate into a living practice sustained by reflection, dialogue, and conviction.

At its heart, the study advances a simple but profound argument:

inclusive education begins not in government resolutions but in teachers’ consciousness. Empowered teachers transform schools into communities of belonging. Unsupported teachers, however well-intentioned, cannot sustain inclusion within bureaucratic inertia.

The implications are clear.

Governance must humanize policy. Leadership must dignify teaching. Training must integrate empathy

with expertise. Only when the system trusts its teachers can inclusion transcend documentation and become daily reality.

This research extends the discourse advanced in Sheokand's earlier works (2016–2024), reaffirming that effective education reform in India—and globally—depends on aligning **policy intent, administrative ethos, and teacher agency**. Sustainable inclusion, therefore, is not achieved by new frameworks but by cultivating institutional compassion and reflective professionalism at every level of the education system.

Final Thought

Inclusion, when practiced with awareness and sincerity, transforms both learners and teachers. It is not just about accommodating difference—it is about *embracing humanity*.

Teachers are not the last link in the policy chain; they are the first light in the inclusive journey.

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