

Navigating Role Conflict and Emotional Strain: A Qualitative Study on the Psycho-Social Challenges of Special Educators in Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

Special educators working in inclusive education settings face significant psycho-social challenges, particularly in managing role conflict and emotional strain. Balancing responsibilities such as teaching, advocacy, and providing emotional support to students with disabilities often leads to role ambiguity and stress (Forlin, 2019). Through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this research explores how these challenges impact educators' emotional well-being and professional satisfaction. Findings reveal that role conflict and emotional exhaustion are prevalent, with educators frequently overwhelmed by the competing demands of their roles (Hughes et al., 2021). Coping strategies, including peer support, self-care, and professional development, were identified as vital in managing stress and maintaining well-being (Miller et al., 2020). This study highlights the need for greater institutional support to address these challenges, emphasizing the importance of policies that promote emotional resilience and professional satisfaction among special educators, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of inclusive education (Lindsay, 2020).

INTRODUCTION

In India, the adoption and implementation of inclusive education ramps up in the wake of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, reflecting the United Nations global mandate on the education of people with disabilities. Such initiatives advocate for the right of every child to receive education, regardless of ability, within mainstream schooling. While these changes have, indeed, opened doors for children with disability access, the psychological and professional burden on special educators (Ministry of Education, 2020) has escalated.

As the crucial supporting pillar of inclusive classrooms, special educators are expected to assume numerous roles such as teacher, counsellor, mediator, and even administrator without any institutional guidance or support (Florian & Camedda, 2020). This complex role leads to significant role conflict and the expectations of different constituencies, such as students and parents, school leadership, and even colleagues, become very divergent. The emotional burden managing the academic, behavioural, and social needs of students with disabilities often leads to emotional strain, burnout, or even premature attrition from teaching (Bettini et al., 2017).

Despite the growing number of inclusive schools in India, research on the lived experiences of special educators remains sparse. Most existing literature tends to focus on students' experiences, overlooking how inclusion policies impact the well-being of special educators (Sharma & Salend, 2016). In the Indian context, important factors such as the strict hierarchical structure of

schools, lack of mental health support, and the continuing social stigma around disability are often ignored (Jain, 2020).

This research attempts to fill the gap by using qualitative approaches to capture the lived experiences of special educators. It aims to tell the emotional story of the professionals, exposing the underlying systemic factors and offering strategic recommendations designed to inform policy, institutional training, and mental health frameworks.

The recent literature has noted the critical dependence on the special educator's well-being on the effectiveness and impact of education inclusivity. Billingsley (2004) highlighted the special educator's working environment and defined it as role ambiguity, within which expectations are not clearly defined and support is not equitably provided. This ambiguity often leads to a disconnect between one's feelings and reality of one's work, and deep professional dissatisfaction. (Billingsley et al., 2002) confirm that inclusion is a function of support, professional development, and collaboration with colleagues and that a lack of these supports leads to increased stress and burnout.

Travers (2017) highlights an added layer of complexity for special educators within low and middle-income countries. Special educators have to deal with the lack of autonomy, social isolation, and an excess of non-teaching roles which cumulatively result in persistent emotional exhaustion. Emam and Mohamed (2011) add that inadequate training and a lack of collaborative peers lowers educators' perceptions of self-efficacy, which in turn leads to burnout. Brunsting, Sreckovic, and Lane (2014) performed a meta-analysis that confirms teacher burnout is often attributed to the excessive emotional labor, lack of effective leadership and mental

health resources, and punitive school environments, all of which are common in under-resourced systems.

In the Indian context, these factors are exacerbated by inflexible bureaucratic structures, deeply rooted cultural stigma, and a lack of investment from institutions. Special educators have frequently been left out of fundamental pedagogical practices, especially during the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), as noted by Sharma and Salend (2016). This omission perpetuates their already seen marginalized professional identity as they do not have the means to fully utilize their skills and yet are overloaded with work. Ghosh and Mitra (2018) comment that many special educators in Indian inclusive schools work in professional isolation and are deprived of mentorship, feedback, or emotional support.

The hierarchical structure of Indian schools, as examined by Jain (2020), creates communication barriers that discourage open discussion around mental health concerns and burnout. This is compounded by pervasive stigma associated with disability, which influences how educators are perceived and how their contributions are valued. Kumar and Patil (2021) found that special educators in inclusive settings experience markedly higher occupational stress levels compared to those in segregated or special schools. Factors contributing to this disparity include limited training opportunities, lack of institutional empathy, and unrealistic expectations imposed on these educators.

Although legislative frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 and the NEP 2020 mandate inclusive practices, implementation remains inconsistent and under-resourced. Singal (2008) and Puri and Abraham (2005) note that Indian inclusion continues to operate as a top-down mandate, lacking integration with local pedagogical traditions and failing to include the voices of special educators in design and delivery.

Importantly, while global literature extensively documents the emotional labour and professional challenges of special educators, the Indian research landscape remains skewed towards quantitative outcomes and student-centric studies, with minimal qualitative exploration of educator experiences. The lived emotional narratives, coping strategies, and invisible systemic barriers that affect special educators remain underrepresented in academic discourse. This absence not only limits scholarly understanding but also inhibits the development of effective, evidence-based support mechanisms aimed at ensuring both educator retention and the overall quality of inclusive education.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was used, with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in participants' lived experiences.

Participants

Fifteen special educators from inclusive schools in North India were purposively selected based on experience, current status in inclusive institutions, and willingness to participate in a 45-60 minute interview. Proper informed consent was obtained from all participants. The sample reflected diversity in gender, experience, and institutional affiliation.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through online semi-structured interviews via Google Meet, covering role expectations, challenges, stressors, support systems, stigma, and professional satisfaction. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Data Analysis

Data were manually analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report production.

Results and Discussion

Five major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Role Conflict in Inclusive Education, (2) Emotional Strain and Burnout, (3) Lack of Support and Training, (4) Intrinsic Rewards and Professional Fulfilment, and (5) Social Perception and Stigma. These themes reflect the layered psycho-social realities of special educators in inclusive schools.

Theme 1: Role Conflict in Inclusive Education

A major challenge voiced by participants was the persistent experience of role conflict in inclusive classrooms, where educators were expected to simultaneously fulfil multiple and often contradictory responsibilities. As one participant noted, *"I constantly feel torn between my role as a teacher and a counsellor. There are days when I feel I am expected to be a counsellor and a teacher simultaneously, which is overwhelming."* Another explained, *"Sometimes, I feel like I'm being asked to do everything. I am not just a teacher but also a counselor, a mediator, and a friend. It's difficult to manage all these expectations at once."*

It accounts to capture the essence of role ambiguity and overload, as educators navigate blurred boundaries between teaching, counselling, and administrative roles. Such overlapping demands not only compromise instructional quality but also create emotional strain, echoing Kahn et al.'s (1964) concept of role conflict and Billingsley's (2004) findings that lack of clear professional boundaries reduces job satisfaction and increases attrition among special educators. In the Indian context, similar concerns have been reported by Bhatnagar and Das (2014) and Singal (2019), who highlight that undefined job roles in inclusive schools heighten stress and undermine teacher efficacy. These findings also resonate with Travers (2017), who observed that in low- and middle-income countries, special educators face additional layers of non-teaching responsibilities, resulting in chronic emotional exhaustion. The blending of roles expressed by participants in this study therefore illustrates how role conflict and emotional strain are interwoven realities for special educators, making role clarity and systemic support essential for sustaining their well-being and professional effectiveness.

Theme 2: Emotional Strain and Burnout

Another significant theme that emerged was the pervasive sense of emotional strain and burnout experienced by special educators, which stemmed not only from academic responsibilities but also from the intense emotional labour of managing students' diverse needs. One participant expressed, *"The emotional toll is often underestimated. At times, I feel like I'm constantly giving to my students but not receiving much in return. It's draining to give so much energy every day."* Another highlighted the cumulative impact of workload, stating, *"The workload is so heavy that sometimes I feel mentally drained by the end of the day. It's not just teaching; it's about managing each child's emotions and academic needs, which is emotionally taxing."* These accounts illustrate how educators often expend emotional and psychological energy beyond their professional boundaries, leading to exhaustion that spills over into personal life. Such findings are consistent with Maslach and Leiter's (2016) multidimensional model of burnout, particularly the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment. Global literature (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003) similarly identifies sustained emotional labour as a key predictor of burnout in special education. In the Indian context, Sharma and Salend (2016) reported that the absence of school-based counselling services and limited mental health resources further exacerbate stress among educators. The verbatim accounts from this study show that emotional strain in inclusive classrooms is not simply a by-product of workload but is deeply rooted in the dual demands of addressing academic and emotional needs simultaneously. This reinforces the central argument of the present research that role conflict and emotional strain are interlinked psycho-social challenges for special educators in inclusive education. Without adequate institutional support and recognition, such chronic emotional labour risks leading to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and attrition, ultimately undermining the broader goals of inclusive education in India.

Theme 3: Lack of Support and Training

Participants consistently reported a significant gap in practical training and professional support, which contributed to heightened stress and role conflict. Many educators emphasized that pre-service and in-service training often remains theoretical, failing to equip them with skills necessary to manage real-life classroom challenges. One participant noted, *"We rarely get practical training. Most of it is theoretical and doesn't prepare us for real classroom challenges."*

The lack of immediate assistance during critical classroom incidents, such as behavioral meltdowns, emerged as a major stressor. Educators described feeling isolated and solely responsible for managing difficult situations, stating, “When a child has a behavioural meltdown, there’s no one to assist me, I’m on my own.”

Moreover, participants highlighted that workshops and professional development programs, though available, were often generic and not tailored to the specific needs of inclusive classrooms. As one educator explained, “Workshops happen, but they are tailored to special education and are generic, not meeting educational needs.”

These findings indicate that insufficient practical training and lack of structured support systems exacerbate role strain, contribute to emotional exhaustion, and limit educators’ confidence in effectively implementing inclusive education strategies.

Theme 4: Intrinsic Rewards and Professional Fulfillment

Despite the considerable challenges reported by participants, special educators also identified aspects of their work that provided intrinsic satisfaction and a sense of professional fulfillment. Educators acknowledged the emotional and intellectual demands of their roles, often describing a “learning-on-the-go” experience that, while stressful, contributed to personal growth and skill development. One participant shared, “We don’t receive enough training on handling emotional or behavioral issues. Sometimes I feel like I’m learning as I go, which is stressful.” This highlights the dual nature of the role: while the lack of structured support creates strain, the process of overcoming challenges fosters resilience and self-efficacy.

Participants also expressed a desire for more targeted workshops and skill-building opportunities, suggesting that professional development directly enhances their sense of competence and

satisfaction. As one educator emphasized, “We need more workshops. It’s frustrating to be expected to manage everything without the tools.” The absence of sufficient resources or training not only contributes to role conflict but also limits the potential for educators to derive fulfillment from their work.

The findings reveal a tension between the intrinsic rewards of teaching in inclusive settings and the external challenges posed by inadequate training and support. Special educators derive satisfaction from making a meaningful difference in students’ lives, yet the lack of practical tools and structured professional development constrains their ability to experience sustained professional fulfillment. This underscores the importance of tailored training programs and ongoing mentorship to optimize both educator well-being and classroom outcomes.

Theme 5: Social Perception and Stigma

Participants emphasized that moments of student progress and achievement provided a powerful source of motivation and professional fulfillment, helping them navigate the emotional strain of their roles. Educators described the joy of witnessing even small developmental milestones, such as a child speaking their first word, as deeply rewarding: “*Seeing a child progress, even in small ways, is what keeps me going. There’s a sense of satisfaction in knowing that you’ve made a difference*”; “*When a child who struggles to speak finally utters their first word in class, it makes all the struggles worthwhile. That moment of achievement is what I live for.*” These accounts highlight that positive social outcomes and recognition of student growth can buffer the stress and role conflict inherent in inclusive education, underscoring the significance of celebrating successes to enhance educator resilience and sustain commitment.

Table 1 Showing Themes, Descriptions, and Verbatim Quotes from Special Educators in Inclusive Education

SNO	THEMES	DESCRIPTION	VERBATIM QUOTE
1	Role Conflict in Inclusive Education	Experiences of conflicting, overlapping, and undefined responsibilities leading to stress and identity strain.	<i>“I constantly feel torn between my role as a teacher and a counsellor. There are days when I feel I am expected to be a Counsellor and a teacher simultaneously, which is over whelming. “</i> <i>“Sometimes, I feel like I’m being asked to do everything. I am not just a teacher but also a counselor, a mediator, and a friend. It’s difficult to manage all these expectations at once.”</i>
2	Emotional Strain and Burnout	Emotional exhaustion from high demands, behavioural challenges, and lack of psychological support.	<i>“The emotional toll is often underestimated. At times, I feel like I’m constantly giving to my students but not receiving much in return. It’s draining to give so much energy every day.”</i> <i>“The workload is so heavy that sometimes I feel mentally drained by the end of the day. It’s not just teaching; it’s about managing each child’s emotions and academic needs, which is emotionally taxing.”</i>
3	Lack of Support and Training	Inadequate institutional backing, insufficient peer mentoring, and limited practical training in inclusive pedagogy.	<i>“We rarely get practical training. Most of it is theoretical and doesn’t prepare us for real classroom challenges.”</i> <i>“When a child has a behavioural meltdown, there’s no one to assist me I’m on my own.”</i> <i>“Workshops happen, but they tailored to special are generic and not education needs.”</i>

4.	Intrinsic Rewards and Professional Fulfilment	Satisfaction, pride, and motivation derived from witnessing student growth and progress	<i>"We don't receive enough training on handling emotional or behavioral issues. Sometimes I feel like I'm learning as I go, which is stressful."</i> <i>"We need more workshops. It's frustrating to be expected to manage everything without the tools."</i>
5	Social Perception and Stigma	Misunderstanding and undervaluation of special educators' work by peers, administrators, and society.	<i>"Seeing a child progress, even in small ways, is what keeps me going. There's a sense of satisfaction in knowing that you've made a difference."</i> <i>"When a child who struggles to speak finally utters their first word in class, it makes all the struggles worthwhile. That moment of achievement is what I live for."</i>

CONCLUSION

This study highlights how special educators in Indian inclusive schools grapple with role conflict, emotional strain, inadequate training, and professional marginalization, all of which significantly affect their well-being and effectiveness. These findings are consistent with Billingsley (2004), who linked unclear role expectations to attrition, and Maslach and Leiter (2016), who identified emotional exhaustion as a key dimension of burnout. Similarly, Mehrotra and Kapoor (2014) observed that Indian teacher training often lacks practical preparation, while Ghosh and Mitra (2018) emphasized the isolation and undervaluation of special educators. At the same time, educators in this study derived intrinsic fulfilment from witnessing student growth, echoing Day and Gu's (2014) argument that teacher resilience is sustained by professional purpose. However, reliance on intrinsic motivation without systemic reform is unsustainable. The inclusive education cannot thrive unless the psycho-social needs of special educators are prioritized. Institutional empathy, role clarity, context-specific training, and professional recognition are essential to sustain both educator well-being and the broader goals of inclusion in India.

Limitations

- The sample was limited to 15 participants from urban North India, reducing the generalizability of findings.
- The cross-sectional design offers a snapshot of experiences but does not track changes over time.
- Participant responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, especially concerning workplace criticism.
- The study did not account for differences based on school type (private vs. public) or educational board affiliations.

Future Implications

1. Future studies should explore how the challenges and coping strategies of special educators evolve over time.
2. Including educators from rural areas, government schools, and different states can offer a broader understanding.
3. Investigate the role of school leadership in mitigating educator stress and promoting inclusive practices.
4. More structured wellness programs, institutional mental health support, and differentiated job roles.
5. Implement pilot interventions such as reflective supervision, mentorship programs, and emotional debriefing sessions to assess effectiveness in reducing burnout.

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- Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**
1. Years of experience in inclusive education
 2. Type of school (public/private/NGO)
 3. Types of disabilities supported
 4. How do you define your role in an inclusive classroom?
 5. What challenges do you face in balancing responsibilities?
 6. Can you share an instance of role conflict at work?
 7. What emotional challenges do you experience in this role?
 8. Have you faced burnout or compassion fatigue?
 9. How do you cope with stress in your work?
 10. What kind of support (peer, institutional, personal) helps you manage challenges?
 11. Do you receive adequate training and emotional support?
 12. How is your collaboration with general educators and school leadership?
 13. Do you feel recognized and valued for your role?
 14. What changes would improve your experience as a special educator?
 15. What institutional or policy support is lacking