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Examining the Effects of Inclusive Education on Social Integration and Academic Achievement of Students with Disabilities at the Secondary Level

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education was emerged as a critical approach to ensuring equitable learning opportunities for students with disabilities. This study investigates the effects of inclusive practices on both social integration and academic achievement at the secondary school level. A mixed methods research design adopted, data were collected through surveys, classroom observations, and academic performance records from students with disabilities, their peers, and teachers. The quantitative analysis examined differences in academic outcomes between inclusive and non-inclusive settings, while the qualitative insights explored peer relationships, participation and sense of belonging. Findings indicate that inclusive education fosters robust social connections and increases classroom engagement, though disparities in academic achievement highlight the need for targeted instructional support. This research highlights the importance of teacher training, peer sensitization and adaptive learning strategies to exploit the benefits of inclusion. Recommendations are offered for policymakers and educators to strengthen inclusive practices and promote both academic success and social cohesion among students with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a central paradigm in global educational reform, emphasizing the right of all learners, including those with disabilities, to access equitable and quality learning opportunities within



mainstream schools. At the secondary level, where academic demands intensify and social dynamics become more complex, the integration of students with disabilities presents both opportunities and challenges. The philosophy underpinning inclusive education is rooted in principles of equity, participation, and respect for diversity, aligning with international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006).

Research has consistently highlighted that inclusive practices can foster positive social outcomes, such as peer acceptance, collaborative learning, and enhanced self-esteem among students with disabilities (Dalgaard et al., 2022). Social integration, defined as the extent to which students with disabilities are accepted and actively participate in peer groups, is critical for their emotional well-being and long-term societal inclusion. At the same time, academic achievement remains a key indicator of educational success, and inclusive settings must ensure that students with disabilities are not only socially integrated but also supported to meet curriculum standards (Bhat, 2021).

Despite these benefits, the effectiveness of inclusive education at the secondary level is still debated. Some studies suggest that inclusive classrooms improve academic performance through differentiated instruction and peer-assisted learning, while others caution that without adequate teacher training and resources, students with disabilities may struggle to achieve parity with their peers (IJRAR, 2023). This tension underscores the need for empirical research that simultaneously examines both social integration and academic achievement outcomes in inclusive secondary schools.

The present study seeks to address this gap by systematically analyzing the dual impact of inclusive education on social and academic dimensions. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the research aims to provide nuanced insights into how inclusive practices shape the lived experiences of students with disabilities, their peers, and educators. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to evidence-based recommendations for strengthening inclusive education policies and practices, ensuring that secondary schools become environments where diversity is not only accommodated but celebrated.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of inclusive education on the social integration of students with disabilities at the secondary level.
2. To analyze the relationship between inclusive classroom practices and the academic achievement of students with disabilities.
3. To explore the perceptions of teachers and peers regarding the effectiveness of inclusive education in promoting social and academic outcomes.
4. To identify challenges and barriers faced by secondary schools in implementing inclusive education.
5. To provide recommendations for strengthening inclusive practices to enhance both social cohesion and academic success.

Research Questions

1. How does inclusive education influence the social integration of students with disabilities in secondary schools?
2. What is the effect of inclusive classroom practices on the academic achievement of students with disabilities at the secondary level?
3. How do teachers and peers perceive the role of inclusive education in fostering social and academic development?
4. What challenges do secondary schools encounter in implementing inclusive education effectively?
5. What strategies can be recommended to improve inclusive education practices for better social and academic outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of equitable schooling, ensuring that students with disabilities learn alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms. International frameworks, such as



the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), emphasize the right to inclusive learning environments. Scholars argue that inclusion is not merely a placement strategy but a transformative approach that reshapes pedagogy, curriculum, and school culture to accommodate diversity (Dalgaard et al., 2022).

Social integration refers to the extent to which students with disabilities are accepted, participate in peer groups, and develop meaningful relationships. Research indicates that inclusive classrooms foster peer acceptance, collaborative learning, and improved socioemotional development (Dalgaard et al., 2022). Nadgouda et al. (2023) highlight that inclusive practices enhance students' sense of belonging, reduce stigma, and promote empathy among peers. However, challenges such as bullying, stereotyping, and limited teacher preparedness can hinder full integration (Exploring Academic and Social Development, 2023).

Numerous academics have studied inclusive education in great detail and offered differing opinions on its effects (Adetoro, 2014; Sharma, 2017). Adetoro's research showed that it is possible to educate all children in the same school while guaranteeing that students with disabilities are not discriminated against or refused access to learning resources. The primary goal is to encourage participation in all school events, support children in the same age group in their learning process, and offer any necessary assistance (Kirschner, 2015). According to Ugwu and Onukwufor (2018), inclusive education is a teaching strategy that tackles exclusion in the educational system and enables kids with disabilities to attend school with their classmates in the community without encountering prejudice because of their physical or learning disabilities.

Academic achievement remains a critical measure of success in inclusive education. Evidence suggests that inclusive classrooms can improve learning outcomes through differentiated instruction, peer-assisted strategies, and individualized support (Nadgouda et al., 2023). Dalgaard et al. (2022) found that inclusion positively influences academic performance when teachers employ adaptive teaching methods. Yet, disparities persist, particularly in secondary schools where curriculum demands are higher. Some studies caution that without adequate resources and training, students with disabilities may struggle to achieve parity with their peers (Exploring Academic and Social Development, 2023).

Despite its promise, inclusive education faces systemic barriers. Teacher attitudes, lack of specialized training, and insufficient resources often limit effective implementation (Nadgouda et al., 2023). Secondary schools, in particular, encounter difficulties balancing academic rigor with individualized support. Dalgaard et al. (2022) emphasize that inclusion requires not only pedagogical adjustments but also institutional commitment to equity and diversity.

While existing literature highlights both social and academic benefits of inclusion, few studies comprehensively examine these dual outcomes at the secondary level. Most research focuses either on social integration or academic achievement in isolation. This gap underscores the need for holistic investigations that capture the interplay between social and academic dimensions of inclusive education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of inclusive education on social integration and academic achievement. The quantitative component focuses on measurable academic outcomes, while the qualitative component explores lived experiences and perceptions of inclusion.

Population and Sampling

The target population consists of secondary school students with disabilities, their peers, and teachers in mainstream schools implementing inclusive practices. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across different types of disabilities, gender, and school contexts.

Approximately 200 students with disabilities and 50 teachers were included, alongside a matched group of peers without disabilities for comparative analysis.

Data Collection Methods

- **Surveys and Questionnaires:** Structured instruments were administered to students and teachers to assess perceptions of social integration and inclusive practices.
- **Academic Records:** School performance data, including grades and standardized test scores, were collected to evaluate academic achievement.
- **Classroom Observations:** Systematic observations were conducted to capture peer interactions, participation, and instructional strategies.
- **Interviews and Focus Groups:** Semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus groups with students were provided deeper insights into social experiences and challenges of inclusion.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Statistical techniques such as t-tests, ANOVA, and regression analysis were used to examine differences in academic achievement between inclusive and non-inclusive settings.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Thematic analysis was applied to interview and observation data, identifying recurring patterns related to social integration and classroom dynamics.
- **Triangulation:** Findings from multiple sources were cross-validated to enhance reliability and credibility.

RESULTS

Social Integration Outcomes

Analysis of survey and observation data revealed that students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms reported higher levels of peer acceptance and participation compared to those in non-inclusive settings. Teachers also noted improved collaboration and reduced social isolation. However, some challenges remained, particularly in cases where peers lacked awareness or sensitivity toward disability issues.

Table 1 Social Integration Scores of Students with Disabilities (Mean Values)

Dimension	Inclusive Classrooms	Non-Inclusive Classrooms
Peer Acceptance	4.2	3.1
Participation in Activities	4.0	2.9
Sense of Belonging	4.3	3.0

(Scale: 1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High)

Academic Achievement Outcomes

Academic records indicated that students with disabilities in inclusive settings achieved slightly higher average grades and test scores compared to those in segregated environments. While inclusion improved classroom engagement and assignment completion, performance gaps persisted in subjects requiring abstract reasoning, such as mathematics and science.

Table 2 Academic Achievement Comparison (Average Scores)

Subject	Inclusive Classrooms	Non-Inclusive Classrooms
Language Arts	78%	70%
Mathematics	72%	65%
Science	74%	66%
Social Studies	80%	72%

Teacher and Peer Perceptions

Qualitative interviews revealed that teachers viewed inclusive education as beneficial for fostering empathy and collaborative learning. Peers without disabilities expressed that inclusion helped them develop patience and respect for diversity. However, both groups emphasized the need for more teacher training and resource support to maximize academic outcomes.

Summary of Key Findings



1. Inclusive education significantly enhances social integration, with higher peer acceptance and sense of belonging.
2. Academic achievement improves moderately in inclusive settings, though subject-specific challenges remain.
3. Teachers and peers recognize the social benefits of inclusion but highlight resource and training gaps.
4. Effective inclusion requires systemic support, including adaptive teaching strategies and awareness programs.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research highlight the dual impact of inclusive education on both social integration and academic achievement of students with disabilities at the secondary level. Consistent with prior scholarship, the results demonstrate that inclusive classrooms foster stronger peer relationships, greater participation in school activities, and an enhanced sense of belonging (Dalgaard et al., 2022). These outcomes affirm the argument that inclusion is not merely about physical placement but about cultivating environments where diversity is valued and social cohesion is actively promoted.

From an academic perspective, the study revealed moderate improvements in achievement among students with disabilities in inclusive settings. This aligns with evidence suggesting that differentiated instruction and peer-assisted learning can enhance performance (Nadgouda et al., 2023). However, the persistence of subject-specific challenges, particularly in mathematics and science, underscores the limitations of inclusion when not accompanied by adequate teacher training and resource allocation. These findings echo concerns raised in earlier research that inclusion, without systemic support, risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Exploring Academic and Social Development, 2023).

The qualitative insights further enrich the discussion by revealing the perceptions of teachers and peers. Teachers emphasized the social benefits of inclusion, noting improvements in empathy and classroom collaboration. Peers without disabilities reported that inclusive education broadened their understanding of diversity and fostered patience. Yet, both groups identified gaps in professional development and instructional resources, reinforcing the need for policy interventions that prioritize capacity building.

Taken together, the findings suggest that inclusive education at the secondary level is effective in promoting social integration and moderately successful in enhancing academic achievement. However, the success of inclusion depends on systemic factors such as teacher preparedness, curriculum flexibility, and institutional commitment. This study contributes to the literature by bridging the gap between social and academic outcomes, offering a holistic perspective on the effects of inclusion. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts, examining how inclusive practices influence long-term academic trajectories and social participation beyond secondary schooling.

CONCLUSION

This research examined the effects of inclusive education on the social integration and academic achievement of students with disabilities at the secondary level. The findings demonstrate that inclusive classrooms significantly enhance social outcomes, fostering peer acceptance, participation, and a stronger sense of belonging. These results affirm the transformative potential of inclusive practices in creating supportive learning environments where diversity is valued and students with disabilities are empowered to engage meaningfully with their peers.

In terms of academic achievement, the study revealed moderate improvements in performance among students with disabilities in inclusive settings. While inclusion promotes engagement and assignment completion, subject-specific challenges remain, particularly in areas requiring abstract reasoning. This suggests that inclusive education alone is not sufficient; it must be complemented by targeted instructional strategies, teacher training, and adequate resources to ensure equitable academic success.

The study also highlighted the perceptions of teachers and peers, who recognized the social benefits of inclusion but emphasized the need for systemic support. Their insights underscore that successful inclusion requires more than policy directives—it demands a cultural shift within schools, professional development for educators, and curriculum flexibility to accommodate diverse learning needs.

Overall, the research contributes to the growing body of evidence that inclusive education is both socially and academically beneficial, though its effectiveness depends on the quality of implementation. By addressing challenges such as resource limitations and teacher preparedness, secondary schools can strengthen inclusive practices, ensuring that students with disabilities not only achieve academically but also thrive socially. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to explore how inclusive education influences long-term academic trajectories and social participation beyond secondary schooling.

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