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CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Background:

There is an urgent educational need to investigate the cultural gaps, cultural competemility, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) that affect the teaching and learning environments in inclusive education worldwide. This research investigates the significance of international education programs, cross-cultural exchanges, and multicultural curricula in fostering cultural understanding, relationships, associations, and global citizenship in inclusive classrooms and societies.

Methods:

This mixed study analyses the current perceptions of cultural compatibility, diversity, equity, inclusion, and related challenges among students and teachers involved in inclusive education and recommends future directions.

Outcomes:

Pointers for why Multicultural, inclusive education is essential to students,

1. Students can identify and connect with people of different races, ethnicities, and cultures.

2. Students acquire a more profound knowledge of diversity and are open to interconnectedness and human relationships amidst diverse individuals.

3. Students are encouraged to be open-minded, flexible, and receptive.

4. Students are better equipped to succeed in varied workplaces or settings while associating with diverse social groupings.

5. Inclusion serves as a model democracy where students from diverse abilities and cultures interact and appreciate each other.

Conclusion:

Parents are the primary decision-makers regarding their Children's education. Inclusive education involves various stakeholders, viz. teachers, students, parents, and external groups such as the community, psychologists, politicians, school principals, and administrators. Their opinions will direct policymakers and school authorities to provide support and direction for inclusive education across various disabilities and cultures.

Keywords: Cultural Perspectives, Inclusive Education, Special Education

INTRODUCTION & HISTORY OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:

Inclusive education is a philosophy and approach that aims to ensure that all learners, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equal educational access and opportunities [1]. Usually, inclusive education is considered only in the context of special education, but in reality, it includes all the vulnerable and socially excluded groups [2]. The Inclusive Education Approach aims to provide equal opportunities for all students, irrespective of their disabilities. This approach promotes valuing and accepting student abilities and differences in an unbiased manner [3]. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that education is a human right that should be available to everyone [4].

Inclusive Education is an educational trend that many countries worldwide are trying to adopt as an innovative concept. It must be practiced with the latest scientific advancements in special education. It also emulates relevant International Conventions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which organized the Salamanca Conference in Spain, which resulted in the 1994 Salamanca statement and framework.

Twenty-five international organizations and 92 countries signed this statement. The primary objective of this statement was to develop and promote inclusive education worldwide [3].

Cultural Aspects of Inclusive Education:

With recent technological advancements, the ease of travel, and the increasing popularity of student exchange programs, non-immigrant student and employment visas, and study abroad initiatives, students experience diverse cultures first-hand, and it becomes imperative to develop a global mindset. Programs of these kinds also facilitate the exchange of ideas, cultural values, and traditions in education. This multicultural education promotes empathy, understanding, and respect for other cultures and helps students develop a global identity. This ensures that global citizens initiate and engage in cross-cultural dialogue with people from different backgrounds and create a better global society [5].

According to [6], inclusive education is a worldwide movement with no explicit or rigid definition. It is contingent upon the demands of the specific country, politics, economy, time, and culture. Despite the many research studies, inclusive education still lacks a clear, unambiguous definition. However, the primary goal of inclusive education would be to provide appropriate and adequate education in public schools in the area closest to the home of students, irrespective of their special needs or disability, along with other students of the same age, and provide services for effective participation.

Inclusive education entails a complete transformation of the education process, including changes in legislation, policy development, financial management, administration, educational planning, design, instructional delivery, and evaluation practices. It also includes going beyond policies and reorganizing schools to create an inclusive environment that caters to the needs of neurodiverse learners. Inclusive education also seeks to bring about holistic changes in the education system to provide equal access and opportunities for students of all ability levels [1].

Many scholars agree that the Salamanca Statement and Framework played a critical role in inclusive education and was a vital milestone in developing and promoting inclusive education worldwide [7]. Hence, it becomes essential for any educational system striving to be part of the global education system that offers fundamental human rights, like citizenship and belonging, to incorporate inclusive education [4].

Differences between the often confused terms - "Integration" and "Inclusion":

To begin with, the focus of integration is on the students and their abilities to include them in their Least Restrictive Environment, which might be their general education or self-contained classrooms [8]. In comparison, inclusion comes from the school setting, where all the environments are created to be suitable and welcoming for students with special needs [9]. Secondly, integration places the responsibility for the success of the students with disabilities on them, and the school is considered only as a partner in the accommodation and placement process [10]. On the other hand, the school is viewed as a vital part of the initialization process for implementing the inclusive education process, which emphasizes the responsibility of the school to adapt or modify curricula and teaching methodologies [11]. Thirdly, integration does not involve restructuring the school environments to accommodate students with special needs. In contrast, inclusion refers to adapting and modifying school environments to suit the specific needs of students with disabilities [12].
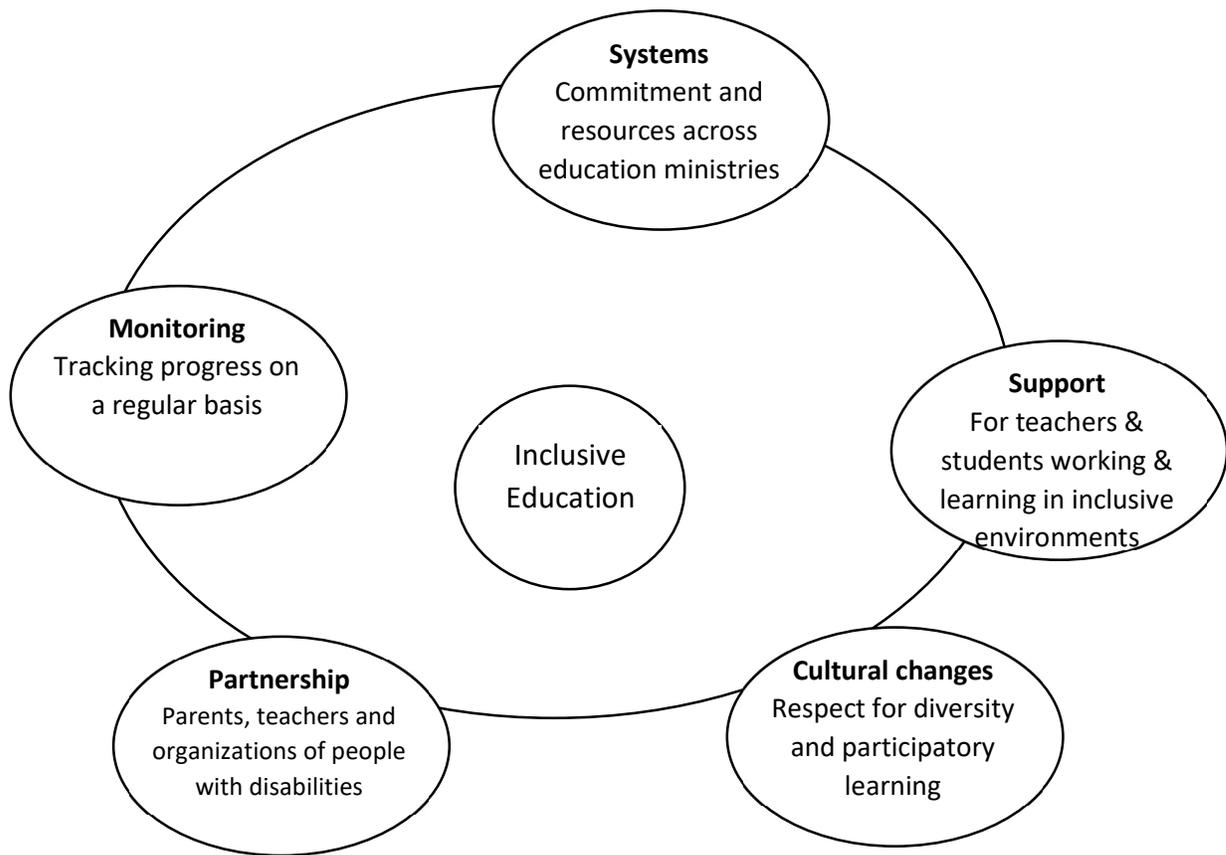
UNICEF Model:

Figure 1: Adapted from the UNICEF Model

Thus, multicultural education is a revolution and social transformation **[13]**. It penetrates and impacts every activity of an educational system, including drafting policies, staffing educational institutions, studying the pedagogy of curriculum, testing and assessments, funding and sponsorships, and student, parent, and community involvement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Initially, a search was conducted in many online databases for the key terms "cultural perspectives on Inclusive education" and "inclusive education." The databases searched were Google, Google Scholar, PubMed, ERIC, EBSCO, and Research Gate. Since inclusion has multiple interpretations and has seldom been defined or stated clearly in policy documents, it was challenging to find precisely suitable articles. The ambiguity in inclusive education exists worldwide, as the concept of inclusive education is not explicitly defined in many documents **[14]**. 30 documents overlapping the previous selection had to be removed due to synonymous usage of "inclusion" and "integration."

Subsequently, around 250 articles were selected, which was further narrowed to articles from 2019 to 2024. Duplicate articles were removed. Then, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Finally, twenty-six articles were selected, thoroughly analyzed, and synthesized for this research study.

Types of Possible Diversities in an Inclusion Classroom:

There is an urgent need to examine the current gaps in cultural competemility, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA).

Various diversity factors that influence the successful implementation of inclusive education:

1) **Ability/disability diversity:** This domain includes diversities in the students's physical, cognitive, learning, processing, capabilities, or deficits.

2) **Age diversity:** This domain includes differences in the students' ages arising from failures, drop-outs, and re-enrollments.

3) **Gender diversity:** This category includes differences in gender identities, sexual orientations, or expressions among the students. Gender compounds disability, particularly in the context of girls with disabilities. They are doubly disabled. Their safety and security at school, at home, or on the way to school/home against sexual acts of violence becomes essential.

4) **Ethnic diversity:** This domain includes differences in race, culture, ethnicity, and national and linguistic origins of the students. Race or a person's skin color significantly impacts him/her and their social expectations. Students tend to compare themselves to each other when engaged in classroom activities [15]. Ethnicity relates to culture and nationality. African Americans, Mexicans, Europeans, Indians, Asians, and Chinese are some of the common ethnicities. In many cultures, there is a stigma attached to disabilities. These negative attitudes can create obstacles to inclusive education practices. People from different ethnicities speak different languages at their home. English is the most common language in many classrooms. Accommodations are necessary for multi-lingual learners (ML) whose first language is not English. Effective communication between students and educators is an essential component of inclusive education. Multilingual learners, or learners of English as a second language, need accommodations to access the curriculum in general education classrooms.

5) **Religious diversity:** This refers to affinity towards specific religious or sectarian beliefs, practices, rituals, and value systems.

6) **Socioeconomic diversity:** This includes differences in social strata like income or salary, educational levels, occupations, and housing comforts of the students and their families. A student's socioeconomic status can affect his/her participation in the classroom. The availability of computers with good internet at home depends on the economic status.

7) **Experiential diversity:** This includes differences in the life experiences of students, like immigration, military service, adoption, abuse, or foster care.

8) **Geographic Identity:** This includes differences in where the students come from, like their localities or regions, and experiences based on where they live, learn, or play.

Other barriers to Inclusive Education for children with Disabilities:

A large variety of factors deny equitable access to education. Separate schools, classrooms, or marginalization in mainstream settings create different and often less robust educational experiences for students with disabilities. The lack of a unified and single

universal definition for Inclusive Education and the constant overlap and confusion in the use of terms like "Mainstreaming," "Integration," and "placement," as well as regional variations from one country to another and between different educational systems, is yet another barrier to the successful implementation of inclusive education.

It was reported that the inclusion rate of Students with Disabilities(SWD) in Florida State in the USA increased from 64% in 2010 to 71% in 2015 and 76% in 2020 **[16]**. He also reported that Florida State in the USA had child counts for the 2019-20 school year for students with disabilities (SWD) under ages 6-21 in seven categories: American Indian / Alaskan Native, Asian, Black / African American, Hispanic/Latino, Two or more

races, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or Whites. In all seven racial categories, the percentages of overall SWDs and the percentages of students in inclusion were significantly similar.

In the 2019-20 school year, when the inclusion rates were examined by **[16]**, under the domains of disability and race, for three of the most common seven races, it was observed that white students had a higher disability identification rate and a higher rate of placement in inclusion settings when compared to the students from the Hispanic and black populations. Hispanic students were less likely to be identified as students with disability. In contrast, black students were more likely to be identified as SWD but less likely to be placed in an inclusion setting.
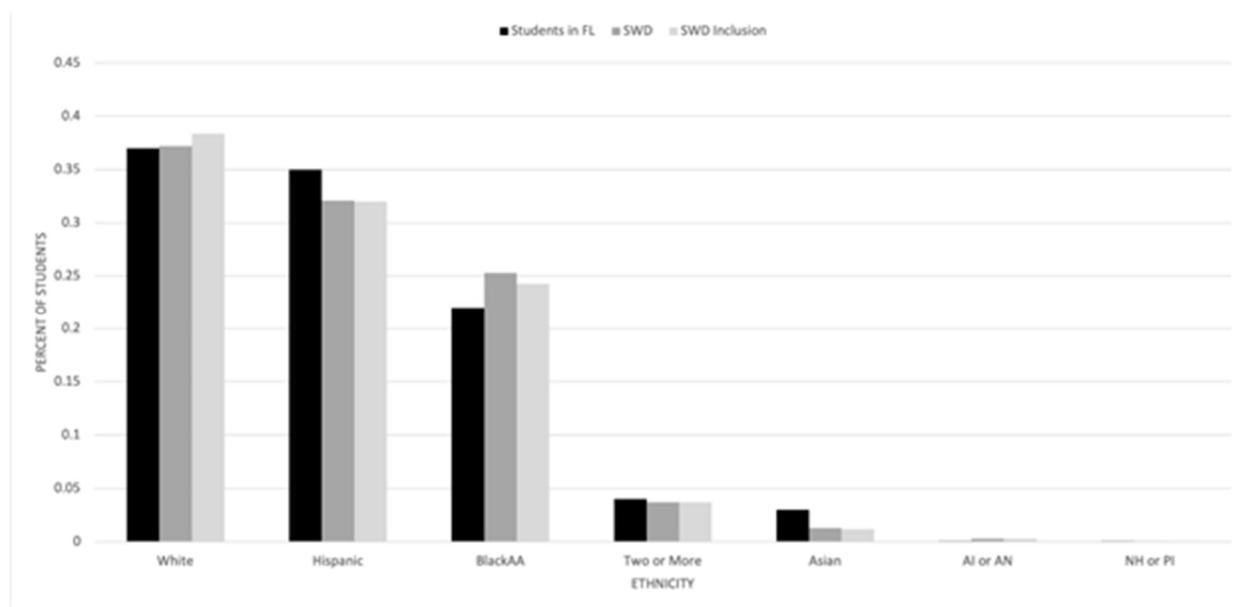

Figure 2: A visual analysis of the data from Silva et al.'s Inclusion Census, 2022

In order to foster an inclusive school culture, all school personnel must value diversity and perceive differences in abilities as assets. This idea has been echoed worldwide [17]. Social factors include negative social and parental attitudes regarding disabilities due to religious or cultural perceptions of disabilities as punishments for sins. Other barriers to the successful implementation of equitable, inclusive education for children with disabilities are inadequate teacher training in inclusive methodology, lack of funding, high student-teacher ratios, and little support from the administration for students with disabilities.

Creating Inclusive Education System:

In a culturally inclusive classroom, students and staff members recognize, appreciate, and capitalize on diversity to enrich the learning experiences [18]. A culturally inclusive environment encourages all individuals, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or political beliefs, to develop personal relationships and effective intercultural skills to encourage equitable participation in inclusive education.
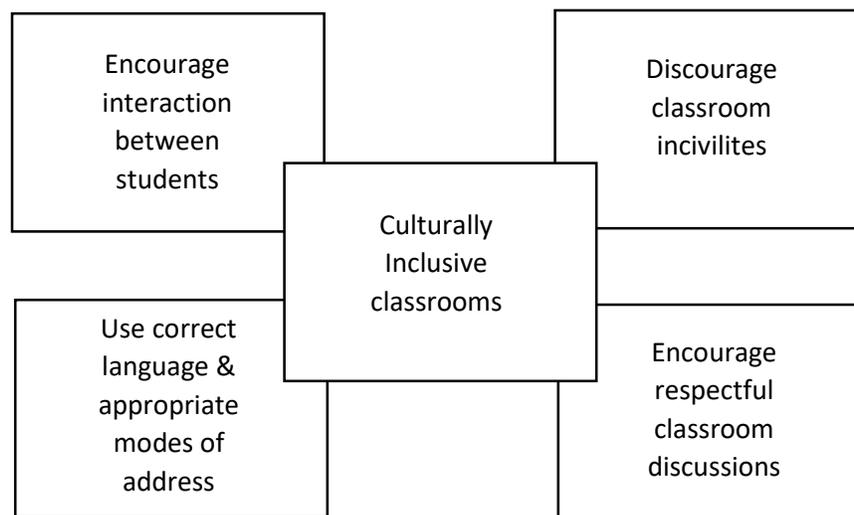

Figure 3: Recommended Strategies to assist with creating a culturally inclusive classroom

A higher reliance on test scores for educational placement and commencement decisions occurs worldwide. Marginalized students are at an even more significant disadvantage due to segregational educational practices. Inclusive education recognizes that children have different characteristics, abilities, and needs. Therefore, they are made to learn together in an environment that appreciates similarities while accommodating their disabilities. Inclusive education views integration as an opportunity for growth with

an atmosphere for enriched learning. Inclusive education requires systematic policy shifts in integrating children with disabilities into the classroom and restructuring schools' culture, practices, and policies.

The definition of inclusion must be updated and adjusted to suit the various contexts, human requirements, and diversity. It cannot have a single, universal definition [19].

New tensions between the many education stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, school principals, researchers, and policymakers, are all linked to the pursuit of inclusive education [20].

International and national legislation has continued to move towards inclusive education, yet there seem to be many gaps between the philosophy and the principles of inclusive education and systemic practices [21].

Students and teachers acknowledge, value, and use diversity to enhance learning in a culturally inclusive classroom. This promotes the development of interpersonal relationships and practical intercultural skills in people of all ages, gender identities, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, faiths, gender identities, or political views [18].

Teacher training and support for multicultural inclusion:

The fundamental goal of ensuring teachers' professional training for culturally inclusive education is establishing appropriate learning opportunities for children from varied cultural backgrounds [20].

Nowadays, the teaching profession is heavily regulated at the national and international levels (for example, the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child). The socio-cultural approach to education emphasizes the significance of cultural artifacts in influencing teachers' attitudes and actions, both explicitly and implicitly. When examining human professional activities from a sociocultural viewpoint, it is necessary to identify mediation tools to comprehend their complex and dynamic relationships and how they may affect how humans think and act professionally. Mediation helps people reach educated, acceptable, and practical agreements [20].

A sociocultural approach to teacher education must focus on teaching and learning, emphasizing the numerous cultural and professional artifacts mediating varied teacher tasks. Key assumptions and concepts of a socio-cultural approach suggest that teacher education should provide opportunities for student teachers to adopt a coherent set of mediation artifacts (principles, norms, values, knowledge, and attitudes) that will allow them

to ensure equal learning opportunities for all children.

The Master of Education program in special needs education prepares teachers to evaluate individuals' special needs, implement associated teaching strategies in regular or special schools, and serve as school consultants for various educational challenges. During a three-year program, teacher students average twenty-eight days of internship and thirty days of observation at schools or specialized institutes.

The Index for Inclusion to help in the movement towards Inclusion:

In its correct sense, inclusion is a model of democracy. Democracy means valuing diverse communities in society, and these values are reflected in schools. Teachers provide students opportunities to learn about and accept individual differences in culture, religion, and disability.

The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) developed the Index for Inclusion in collaboration with the University of Manchester and Christ Church University College in Canterbury. Maria-Luise Braunsteiner after three years of research in 25 schools across England, the index was published in 2000 and distributed to 26,000 schools. It has been translated into thirty-seven languages [17].

The index for inclusion includes three dimensions:

Dimension A: Creating inclusive cultures

Dimension B: Producing inclusive policies

Dimension C: Evolving inclusive practices

These dimensions help in the movement toward inclusion. Each dimension contains statements or indicators against which existing arrangements in the specific school setting can be compared by self-assessment. This process helps to identify and implement priorities for what needs to be changed. Each indicator is linked to questions that define its meaning, create reflection and dialogue, and prompt further questions. The index focuses on five primary values: equality, participation, community, respect for diversity, and sustainability. Every activity in the school, like the curricula and the interactions and connections among all school personnel and students, should be linked to these principles [22].

Transforming Parents' Views Towards Inclusion:

Parent perceptions of inclusion were much more positive when they had a more active role, participation, and contribution towards the decisions surrounding the educational services provided to their children. Their children received inclusive values fostered by engaging in a dialogue and encouraging equal

participation. Starting a dialogue with parents can help to change their attitudes towards inclusion and make them aware of the inclusive practices for all children. It makes the parents equal partners and stakeholders in the joint endeavors to improve the conditions for the successful implementation of inclusion [18].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Research has shown that inclusion can only be successful if the teachers are willing and trained to teach the special needs children and believe it is possible to include them in mainstream schools. Based on the systematic review and review of studies, it was found that

1. Most of the teachers believed that the inclusion of special needs children in mainstream schools was beneficial

2. Teachers felt classroom management after the integration of students with special needs would be challenging

3. There is not much difference between the views of mainstream and special education teachers about integration or mainstreaming.

4. Teachers feel that integration would require extensive training of general education teachers to handle special children and their unique needs.

Many countries worldwide are working to promote inclusive education. Since the UN Convention was passed in 2009, inclusion has been implemented worldwide with varying levels of effort and resources. Special schools still exist, and they are supported by some parents, educators, and the government. However, the extent of handicap determines the choice of a special school, and the parents' educational and social backgrounds influence their attitudes toward inclusive education. Multicultural, inclusive education is essential for students for the following reasons:

1. Students can identify and connect with people of different races, ethnicities, and cultures.

2. Students acquire a more profound knowledge of diversity and are open to interconnectedness and human relationships among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

3. The inclusion experience trains students to be open-minded, flexible, and receptive.

4. Students are better equipped to succeed in varied workplaces or settings while associating with diverse social groupings.

5. Inclusion serves as a model democracy where students from diverse abilities and cultures interact and appreciate each other.

Recommendations for successful implementation of Multicultural Inclusive education:

Evidence has shown that multicultural education needs to adequately address difficulties connected to implementing inclusive education in a multicultural classroom [13]. This involves removing the barriers in setting, interaction, communication, curriculum, instruction, socialization, and evaluation at all levels of inclusive education. The following strategies are recommended for implementing multicultural, inclusive education successfully:

(1) Ongoing research studies should focus on inclusive education, and a universal definition must be reached.

(2) Researching relevant material, data, case studies, and model programs for inclusive education would be highly beneficial additions.

(3) People with varied needs should drive these research efforts by defining themselves, their communities, and their concerns. Possible solutions for those concerns should also be evaluated and understood in terms of application.

(4) Ensure children are enrolled at schools closest to their homes.

(5) All children should be allowed to learn in regular, heterogeneous classrooms with same-aged peers of varying ability levels.

(6) All study programs should be similar, with adaptations and modifications to suit each student's specific needs.

(7) Children should be able to participate fully in all educational activities and events, with adaptations and accommodations, if necessary.

(8) Children should be supported in forming and maintaining friendships and social relationships with their peers in school and community.

(9) Resources and training should be provided for all the teachers, administrators, behavior specialists, psychologists, and others involved in the inclusive education of children with special needs.

(10) The curriculum should be flexible, with room for incorporating differentiation strategies.

(11) Interactive inclusionary teaching strategies should be planned and developed to fulfill the special needs of students.

(12) Draft multi-cultural curricula incorporating various perspectives, histories, and cultural elements into the

learning resources, fostering cultural understanding and appreciation.

(13) Representation of the diverse socio-cultural groups in educational materials is necessary to ensure equitable visibility.

(14) Promote a sense of Global Citizenship through awareness of global issues, understanding their disabilities, and possible modes of rehabilitation, mainstreaming, and self-advocacy.

(15) Teachers should accommodate students whose primary language is not English(Multilingual Learners) by providing access to dictionaries, thesauruses, and cheat sheets to facilitate global communication without hurdles.

(16) Teachers must also be aware of students' sexual orientation and associated experiences to embrace that dimension of diversity.

(17) Socio-economic factors like the family's current financial situation must be assessed to ensure that students with disabilities can afford to pay for technology like laptops, Chromebooks, iPads, or even a reliable internet connection to enable uninterrupted study sessions.

(18) Also, bringing in diverse speakers with various levels of disability and cultural backgrounds enables students to see role models for future growth and development.

(19) Meeting people from diverse cultures fosters a sense of humanity and provides insight into other cultures and traditions.

(20) Educational grants to educational institutions in underdeveloped regions can bridge any infrastructure, technology, and funding deficits.

The following are critical areas for developing culturally inclusive practices [23]

ENVIRONMENT	INSTRUCTION	CURRICULUM
Employs positive strengths-based rhetoric in the classroom	The lesson focuses on the student needs	Reflects student identity
Encourages students to learn about one another.	Incorporates the interests of the students	Learning is student-interest-based.
Focuses on practical and productive associations	Offers challenges and sensitivity	Highlights the contributions of different cultures, races, and ethnicities
Promotes respect for one another	Interactive discussion to engage every student	Dissipates prevailing dominant narratives or belief-systems
Provides resolution of conflicts or disputes	Develops on prior understanding and experience	Instructional discussion regarding evaluations, comments, and feedback

CONCLUSION:

The current research shows that inclusion will only be effective and thriving when the teachers are willing and motivated to teach special needs students and feel they can be absorbed into mainstream classrooms. The overlap and confusion in terms like "integration," "mainstreaming," and "placement" can be clarified to help understand the term "inclusion" better. Hence, the concept of inclusion needs to be applied, and the practice needs to be refined further in methodology rather than emphasizing the theory of inclusion. Inclusion education emphasizes providing appropriate and adequate educational services in public classrooms and schools close to their homes, irrespective of their special needs or abilities **[24, 25]**.

The feedback from relevant stakeholders will help policymakers and school administrators offer the necessary support for inclusive education. Parents are also the ultimate decision-makers for their children's education. According to one study in Iran **[26]**, most parents of linguistically fluent children with autism prefer that their children attend regular schools. Similarly, many parents of students with disabilities prefer inclusive education. Hence, when the primary stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, students, administrators, school principals,

and external groups like psychologists, leisure trainers, and policymakers, collaborate, inclusive education can be implemented successfully.

Through collaboration between different schools, colleges, and Universities across the world, though there is a growth of the global mindset and cultural exchange, it also perpetuates power imbalances and racial stereotypes; it is essential to promote equitable and inclusion practices to facilitate multi-cultural understanding and global citizenship, enabling an exchange of ideas, and traditions and values. It also fosters a genuine understanding and appreciation of different cultures and helps ensure the promotion of inclusion of students with disabilities, with equity and planning with cultural sensitivity. This cultural perspective of inclusive education helps people be aware of the issues due to disability and cultural diversities. Culturally responsive teaching promotes nurturing productive and contributing members of the global society irrespective of their abilities or disabilities. Then, these empowered global citizens, with or without disabilities, are able to address global challenges and engage in sustainable global diversity, equity, and inclusion despite diversities in disabilities and cultures. Hence, education in general, and inclusive education

in particular, transforms students with and without disabilities into informed, global citizens who can create a fair, inclusive, equitable, and sustainable world.

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