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Research Article

Inclusive Education Models at the Foundational Level in the Context of NEP 2020: A Review of Academic Achievement, Social Acceptance and Psychological Well-Being

Anil Kumar Maurya ^{1*}, Dr. Sunil Kumar ²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Education, A.N.D. Teacher's Training College, Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, India
(Affiliated to University of Lucknow, Lucknow)

² Professor, Department of Education, A.N.D. Teacher's Training College, Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, India
(Affiliated to University of Lucknow)

Corresponding Author: * Anil Kumar Maurya

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a transformative shift in Indian education by positioning inclusive education as a cornerstone for equitable and holistic development, particularly during the foundational stage (ages 3–8 years). This review synthesises the conceptual framework of inclusion under NEP 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS, 2022), while examining global and contextual empirical evidence on inclusive models' impacts on academic achievement, social acceptance and psychological well-being. Findings indicate consistent benefits for children with disabilities in cognitive and social domains, neutral to positive effects for typically developing peers and enhanced emotional outcomes through belonging and peer interaction. However, implementation gaps persist in India due to resource constraints and limited post-NEP empirical studies. NEP 2020's emphasis on play-based, multilevel pedagogies and universal access aligns with evidence-based inclusive practices, offering a pathway for holistic development. Recommendations include strengthened teacher preparation and longitudinal research to evaluate outcomes in Indian contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The foundational stage of education (ages 3–8 years) represents a critical period in human development, as over 85% of a child's cumulative brain development occurs before the age of 6, highlighting the essential role of appropriate stimulation and care in shaping long-term cognitive, socio-emotional and physical outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020). This neurodevelopmental sensitivity underscores the urgency of providing equitable, high-quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to all children, particularly those from marginalised groups.

Inclusive education at the early childhood level is conceptualized as a framework that embodies values, policies and practices ensuring the right of every young child—regardless of ability, background, or circumstances—to participate fully in shared activities and contexts as valued members of their families, communities and society, with access, participation and systemic supports as defining features (Division for Early Childhood & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). This approach has gained global recognition as a mechanism for promoting equity, reducing disparities and fostering holistic development.

In the Indian context, despite legislative advancements such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016—which mandates inclusive education, barrier-free access, reasonable accommodations and individualized supports in least restrictive environments—historical reliance on segregated special schools, limited resource allocation and societal barriers have persistently marginalized children with special needs (CWSN) and those from socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016). These structural inequities have resulted in significant gaps in ECCE access and quality, exacerbating intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a transformative paradigm shift by restructuring school education into a 5+3+3+4 design, designating the foundational stage (ages 3–8, encompassing three years of preschool/Anganwadi and Grades 1–2) as a flexible, play-based, multilevel pedagogical phase aimed at universal ECCE provision by 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020). Positioning "equitable and inclusive education" as a core principle guiding all decisions, NEP 2020 aligns closely with the RPwD Act, 2016, while emphasising targeted interventions for SEDGs, early identification of disabilities, assistive technologies and culturally responsive practices to ensure no child is left behind.

This review paper addresses the following objectives:

To examine the conceptual framework of inclusive education at the foundation level as envisioned under NEP 2020.

1. To review existing literature on various inclusive education models implemented at the foundation stage (ages 3–8 years).
2. To analyse empirical studies that examine the impact of inclusive education models on academic achievement at the foundation level.

3. To critically review research findings related to social acceptance and peer interaction in inclusive early childhood classrooms.
4. To examine the relationship between inclusive education practices and the psychological well-being of foundation-level students.
5. To explore how NEP 2020 supports holistic development through inclusive and equitable education practices.

By synthesising policy documents, global position statements and empirical evidence, this analysis illuminates alignments, persistent implementation challenges and pathways for realising NEP 2020's vision of inclusion as a foundational enabler of holistic, equitable development in India.

Conceptual Framework of Inclusive Education at the Foundational Level under NEP 2020

The Conceptual Framework of Inclusive Education at the Foundational Level under NEP 2020 represents a paradigm shift toward equitable, holistic and child-centred early education in India. Grounded in constitutional values of equality, justice and dignity, as well as global commitments to inclusive early childhood development, the framework integrates principles from the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its operationalised form in the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS, 2022).

Core Principles and Vision

NEP 2020 positions inclusive education as the "cornerstone of all educational decisions," explicitly declaring that "equitable and inclusive education—learning for all"—must guide systemic reforms from the foundational stage onward (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 24). The foundational stage (ages 3–8) is restructured as the first pillar of the 5+3+3+4 curricular architecture, encompassing three years of preschool/Anganwadi/Balvatika and Grades 1–2.

This stage prioritises universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), recognising that high-quality, inclusive ECCE yields the greatest dividends for socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and children with disabilities (CWSN), while preventing early learning gaps that perpetuate inequality (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 7–8).

The framework emphasises equity over equality, ensuring differentiated supports rather than uniform treatment. Key equity-focused provisions include:

- Targeted interventions for SEDGs (including girls, transgender children, Scheduled Castes/Tribes, minorities and migrant children) and CWSN, with early screening, identification and provision of reasonable accommodations, assistive devices and barrier-free infrastructure (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 24–26).
- Integration of ECCE into mainstream schooling, phasing out segregation by co-locating Anganwadis with primary schools, introducing Balvatikas and extending inclusive practices to Ashramshalas and alternative schooling formats in tribal and disadvantaged areas (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 7–8).

This aligns with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, mandating education in the least restrictive environment, but NEP 2020 extends this mandate downward to the earliest years, emphasising prevention of exclusion from the foundational stage (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016).

Pedagogical and Curricular Approach

The NCF-FS 2022 operationalises inclusion through a play-based, activity-oriented, multilevel and flexible pedagogy that inherently accommodates diversity (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022). Play is positioned as the core transactional mode, enabling children to learn at their own pace through free, guided and structured activities that foster exploration, discovery and joyful engagement across developmental domains.

The framework draws on the Panchakosha model (five sheaths of human development: Annamaya/physical, Pranamaya/vital energy, Manomaya/mental, Vijnanamaya/intellectual, Anandamaya/blissful), integrating physical-motor, socio-emotional-ethical, cognitive, cultural-artistic and communication/language-literacy-numeracy domains. This holistic lens ensures inclusion addresses the whole child, not isolated deficits (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022, pp. 1–10).

Inclusive strategies embedded in NCF-FS include:

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles: Multiple means of engagement, representation and expression to accommodate varied abilities and learning styles.
- Differentiated instruction, scaffolding, peer-mediated learning, buddy systems and positive behavioural guidance without labelling or stigmatisation.
- Multilingual and culturally responsive practices: Use of home language/mother tongue as the primary medium (at least until Grade 5, preferably Grade 8), bridging to school languages, incorporation of local stories, games, folk traditions and Indian Sign Language (ISL) standardization for hearing-impaired children (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 12–14; National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022).
- Adaptive materials (e.g., multisensory toys, ramps, large-print resources) and observation-based, non-judgmental assessment to track individual progress toward 13 Curricular Goals across six developmental domains.

Teachers serve as facilitators who observe, scaffold and create nurturing environments that promote belonging, self-regulation, empathy and ethical reasoning (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022).

Systemic Supports and Implementation

NEP 2020 envisions systemic enablers for inclusion at the foundational level:

- Cross-disability teacher training, including special educators integrated with generalists via synergy between NCTE and RCI curricula.

- School complexes/clusters for resource sharing, including special educators, resource rooms and assistive technologies.
- Special Education Zones in disadvantaged regions and a Gender Inclusion Fund to address intersectional barriers (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 24–28).

Empirical and scholarly analyses affirm this framework's alignment with evidence-based inclusive ECCE. For instance, research highlights NEP 2020's emphasis on early identification and supports for CWSN in foundational settings as a pathway to long-term equity, though implementation challenges like resource gaps persist (Jain & Mishra, 2021; Dalvi & Sethi, 2021).

Inclusive Education Models at the Foundational Stage

Inclusive education models at the foundational stage (ages 3–8 years) refer to structured approaches that integrate children with diverse abilities, including those with disabilities (CWSN), socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and typically developing peers, within shared early childhood care and education (ECCE) environments. These models prioritise full participation, meaningful access, individualised supports and systemic enablers to promote equity, belonging and holistic development, aligning with global evidence that high-quality inclusion enhances cognitive, social and emotional outcomes without compromising peers' progress (Odom et al., 2004; Division for Early Childhood & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

Globally, inclusive models in early childhood emphasise a continuum of placement options, moving away from segregated settings toward least restrictive environments. Key models include full inclusion with supports, where children with disabilities participate fully in general classrooms alongside typically developing peers, supported by individualised education plans (IEPs), co-teaching and peer-mediated interventions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Itinerant or resource support models involve specialist teachers providing targeted, pull-in services within inclusive settings, supplemented by resource rooms for intensive needs when required. Co-teaching variants—such as one teach-one assist, team teaching, station teaching, parallel teaching and alternative teaching—enable collaborative instruction between general and special educators to differentiate learning and foster social integration (Friend et al., 2010; Scruggs et al., 2007). Naturalistic and embedded instruction approaches embed skill-building (e.g., communication, social competence) into daily routines, play and activities, while peer-mediated strategies use typically developing children as models to enhance interactions and acceptance (Snyder et al., 2015; Rakap & Parlak-Rakap, 2011). In the Indian context, NEP 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS, 2022) operationalise inclusive models through an integrated, play-based ECCE system that inherently accommodates diversity. The policy envisions four primary delivery models for universal ECCE access by 2030: (1) strengthened Anganwadi

centres in communities, (2) Anganwadis co-located with primary schools, (3) pre-primary sections

(Balvatikas) within existing schools and (4) standalone pre-schools (Ministry of Education, 2020; UNICEF India, n.d.). These models phase out historical segregation by integrating health, nutrition and education services under the Anganwadi-school complex framework, ensuring children with disabilities receive early identification, reasonable accommodations, assistive technologies and barrier-free access from age 3 (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 7–8, 24–26).

NCF-FS 2022 embeds inclusion within its play-centric pedagogy, drawing on the Panchakosha holistic development model and universal learning design (UDL) principles. Core inclusive practices include multilevel, flexible activities; differentiated instruction; scaffolding; buddy systems; peer-mediated play; multilingual home-language use; culturally responsive materials (e.g., local stories, games, Indian Sign Language); and observation-based, non-labelling assessment across six developmental domains (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022, pp. 1–10). This approach fosters belonging without stigmatisation, positioning teachers as facilitators who create nurturing, print-rich, adaptive environments with modified seating, multisensory tools and group play to support diverse needs.

Empirical syntheses affirm that these models—when supported by intentional interventions—yield superior outcomes compared to segregated settings, particularly for children with disabilities in social competence, communication and foundational skills, while maintaining or enhancing benefits for typically developing peers through enriched, differentiated experiences (Odom et al., 2004; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). However, successful implementation requires systemic supports, including cross-disability teacher training, resource sharing via school complexes, special educator integration and targeted funding (e.g., Gender Inclusion Fund), as persistent gaps in infrastructure and preparedness challenge full realisation in India (Ministry of Education, 2020).

In essence, inclusive models at the foundational stage under NEP 2020 shift from deficit-oriented to rights-based, culturally rooted systems that leverage play as the primary transactional mode to dismantle barriers, promote equity and enable every child's full potential in diverse, joyful learning communities.

Impact of Inclusive Education on Academic Achievement

The Impact of Inclusive Education on Academic Achievement at the foundational stage (ages 3–8 years) has been extensively examined in global empirical research, with evidence indicating predominantly positive or neutral effects for children with

disabilities (CWSN) and typically developing peers. Inclusive settings—characterised by shared classrooms, individualised supports, differentiated instruction and high-quality interactions—facilitate accelerated skill acquisition in foundational literacy, numeracy, communication and cognitive domains for children with disabilities compared to segregated environments. For typically developing children, outcomes remain neutral to slightly positive, with no consistent evidence of academic detriment when inclusion is well-implemented.

A recent systematic review and meta-analysis synthesising studies on inclusive preschool education found a positive overall impact on children's developmental outcomes, including cognitive and academic domains, with a standardised mean difference (SMD) of 0.583 under a random-effects model, suggesting moderate favourable effects (Wang et al., 2025). This aligns with earlier syntheses demonstrating that children with disabilities in inclusive early childhood programs exhibit greater gains in language, literacy and foundational skills, often outperforming peers in segregated special education settings due to enriched peer modelling, naturalistic instruction and access to general curriculum (Odom et al., 2004; Baker et al., 1995; Katz & Mirenda, 2002).

For typically developing peers, longitudinal and comparative studies show no statistically significant negative impact on academic achievement (e.g., in mathematics, general knowledge, or literacy) and, in some cases, positive associations emerge through enhanced classroom inclusiveness, such as better work organisation and differentiated pedagogies that benefit all learners (Törmänen, 2025; Frontiers in Psychology study, 2025). Meta-analyses and reviews consistently report neutral to small positive effects (effect sizes ranging from 0.04 to 0.20 SD) for typically developing children, with incidental academic benefits from exposure to diverse instructional strategies (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017).

In the Indian context, while NEP 2020's foundational stage emphasises play-based, multilevel pedagogies to support universal foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) under NIPUN Bharat goals, post-2020 empirical studies specific to inclusive ECCE remain limited due to the policy's recency and implementation phase. The framework's alignment with evidence-based inclusion—via UDL, peer-mediated play and early supports for CWSN—positions it to yield similar benefits, though resource constraints and teacher preparedness may moderate outcomes

(Ministry of Education, 2020; National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022).

The table below summarises key findings from major empirical syntheses and studies focused on early childhood/foundational stages:

Outcome Group	Key Findings	Evidence Base / Effect Size	Source/Reference
Children with Disabilities	Greater cognitive, language, literacy, and numeracy gains; accelerated foundational skill acquisition compared with segregated settings; stronger reading/math skills and long-term	Positive effects (SMD = 0.583 for overall development); moderate gains in literacy/math.	Wang et al. (2025); Odom et al. (2004); Baker et al. (1995); Katz & Mirenda (2002)

	academic persistence.		
Typically Developing Peers	Neutral to small positive effects on academic achievement (e.g., mathematics and general knowledge); no significant negative impact; benefits from inclusive classroom organisation and enriched instruction.	Neutral to positive (0.04–0.20 SD); no statistically significant difference in many comparisons.	Törmänen (2025); <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> (2025); Ruijs & Peetsma (2009)
Overall (Inclusive vs. Segregated)	Inclusive settings confer short- and long-term academic advantages for children with special educational needs (CWSN) without compromising the academic outcomes of peers. High-quality inclusion is particularly beneficial.	Consistently positive/neutral effects, with some heterogeneity across studies and contexts.	European Agency (2017); Abt Associates (2016); Campbell Collaboration (2022)

High-quality implementation—featuring trained educators, adequate supports and intentional peer interactions—mediates these benefits, while inadequate resources can attenuate gains. In NEP 2020's play-centric, equitable vision, inclusive foundational education holds strong potential to advance FLN equity, though longitudinal Indian studies are needed to confirm context-specific impacts.

Social Acceptance and Peer Interaction in Inclusive Classrooms

Empirical research on inclusive early childhood classrooms consistently demonstrates that inclusive settings foster greater social acceptance and more frequent, positive peer interactions compared to segregated environments, particularly for children with disabilities (CWSN). In inclusive preschool settings, children with disabilities exhibit increased frequency and diversity of peer interactions, larger friendship networks and higher levels of social competence, as typically developing peers serve as models for social behaviours through naturalistic play and group activities (Odom et al., 2004; Gladh et al., 2022). Systematic observations and intervention studies highlight that peer-mediated strategies—such as buddy systems, modelling, prompting and feedback—significantly enhance social play and acceptance, with children with special educational needs (SEN) showing improved engagement in joint activities and reduced isolation when intentional teacher facilitation supports inclusive play (Gladh et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2015).

For typically developing children, inclusive classrooms promote reduced prejudice, greater empathy and enhanced cooperation, as exposure to diversity through shared play and collaborative tasks builds positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities (Hong et al., 2014; Kwon et al., 2017). Critical reviews note that these benefits are not automatic but require deliberate practices: sensitising narratives, co-created classroom norms, adaptive group activities and teacher guidance to prevent rejection or stereotyping (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Schwab, 2019). Longitudinal evidence indicates sustained effects into elementary years, with inclusive experiences correlating with broader social networks and improved intergroup relations (Odom et al., 2004).

In the Indian context, NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022 embed these evidence-based elements through play-centric pedagogies, multilingual storytelling, local games and buddy systems that promote belonging without labelling. These

strategies align with global findings, countering potential barriers.

barriers like societal attitudes or resource limitations by fostering culturally responsive peer interactions from the foundational stage (Ministry of Education, 2020; National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022).

Inclusive Practices and Psychological Well-Being

Inclusive education practices at the foundational stage contribute positively to the psychological well-being of young children, encompassing emotional regulation, self-esteem, resilience and a sense of belonging. Children with disabilities in inclusive settings demonstrate stronger social-emotional skills, including reduced externalising behaviours, enhanced self-regulation and greater emotional competence, compared to segregated placements, as shared environments provide opportunities for positive peer modelling and supportive relationships (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Division for Early Childhood & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). High-quality inclusion buffers stress through belonging and acceptance, lowering risks of loneliness, anxiety and mental health challenges while promoting resilience and positive self-perception (Odom et al., 2004; Policy Statement on Inclusion, 2015).

For typically developing children, inclusive classrooms cultivate empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence through interactions with diverse peers, yielding incidental benefits to overall well-being without negative impacts (NAEYC, 2009). Evidence from position statements and reviews underscores that meaningful inclusion—featuring access, participation and individualised supports—supports socio-emotional-ethical development, aligning with holistic frameworks that emphasise joyful, nurturing experiences (Britto et al., 2016; Minkinen, 2013).

NEP 2020's emphasis on caring classroom cultures, positive guidance, mental health integration and Panchakosha-based development (physical, vital, mental, intellectual, blissful) amplifies these outcomes by prioritising emotional security and ethical reasoning from ages 3–

8 (Ministry of Education, 2020; National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022). Implementation challenges, such as teacher training gaps, may moderate effects,

but the policy's rights-based approach positions inclusion as a protective factor for psychological flourishing.

NEP 2020's Support for Holistic Development through Inclusive Practices

NEP 2020 operationalises holistic development through inclusive and equitable practices at the foundational stage, viewing education as a means to nurture the whole child across physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, cultural-artistic and ethical domains. The 5+3+3+4 structure designates the foundational stage (ages 3–8) as a play-based, multilevel phase integrating ECCE to promote universal access, early identification of needs and barrier-free participation for SEDGs and CWSN (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 7–8, 24–26).

Key supports include differentiated, UDL-informed pedagogies; multilingual home-language scaffolding; culturally relevant materials (e.g., folk stories, games, ISL); and teacher facilitation of nurturing environments that foster belonging, empathy and self-regulation (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2022). Systemic enablers—cross-disability training, school complexes for resource sharing, assistive technologies and targeted funds—ensure equity, aligning with the RPwD Act 2016 while extending inclusion to prevent early exclusion (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016).

By centring play as the transactional mode and embedding Panchakosha principles, NEP 2020 positions inclusion as the "great leveller," enabling intergenerational equity, ethical development and preparation for a diverse society (Ministry of Education, 2020). This vision converges with global evidence that high-quality inclusive ECCE yields robust holistic outcomes, though Indian-specific longitudinal studies are essential to track realisation amid implementation realities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark shift toward inclusive, equitable and holistic education at the foundational stage (ages 3–8 years), redefining early childhood care and education (ECCE) as a universal right and foundational pillar for lifelong learning. By integrating play-based, multilevel pedagogies, universal design for learning (UDL), multilingualism, culturally responsive practices and targeted supports for socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and children with special needs (CWSN), NEP 2020 aligns closely with global evidence on inclusive education outcomes. Empirical syntheses indicate that high-quality inclusive settings yield positive gains in academic achievement (particularly foundational literacy and numeracy for CWSN), enhanced social acceptance and peer interactions and improved psychological well-being through belonging, emotional regulation and reduced mental health risks, with neutral to positive effects for typically developing peers (Wang et al., 2025; Odom et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS, 2022) operationalises this vision through Panchakosha-based holistic development, positioning inclusion

as a mechanism for equity, ethical reasoning and preparation for a diverse society.

Despite these convergences, post-2020 implementation in India remains nascent, constrained by infrastructure gaps (e.g., inadequate accessible facilities in rural areas), limited teacher training in differentiated and inclusive pedagogies, resource shortages and uneven state-level adoption (Ministry of Education, 2020; recent analyses, 2024–2025). Longitudinal, context-specific empirical studies evaluating academic, social and psychological outcomes in Indian inclusive foundational classrooms are scarce, highlighting the need for rigorous monitoring to bridge policy-practice gaps and confirm sustained impacts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Prioritise Teacher Capacity Building: Scale cross-disability and inclusive pedagogy training through NCTE-RCI synergy, continuous professional development (CPD) and district-level resource centres to equip educators with UDL, peer-mediated strategies and positive behavioural supports.
2. Strengthen Systemic Infrastructure: Accelerate Anganwadi-school complex integration, barrier-free access, assistive technologies and resource rooms, with targeted funding (e.g., Special Education Zones, Gender Inclusion Fund) for underserved regions.
3. Embed Evidence-Based Interventions: Promote peer-mediated play, buddy systems and culturally relevant materials in daily routines to enhance social acceptance and emotional well-being, while integrating mental health supports per NEP guidelines.
4. Conduct Longitudinal Research and Monitoring: Launch nationwide, mixed-methods studies tracking inclusive foundational outcomes (FLN, social competence, psychological indicators) to inform adaptive implementation and policy refinement.
5. Foster Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration: Strengthen partnerships among government, NGOs, communities and private sectors to address attitudinal barriers, ensure community buy-in and sustain inclusive practices.

By addressing these priorities, NEP 2020 can realise its transformative potential, making inclusive foundational education a powerful lever for social justice, holistic child development and an equitable India by 2030 and beyond.

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About the Author



Anil Kumar Maurya is a Research Scholar in the Department of Education at A.N.D. Teacher's Training College, Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, India, affiliated with the University of Lucknow, Lucknow. His academic interests focus on education, teacher education, educational research, pedagogy, and contemporary issues in the field of education.