

**POLICY–PRACTICE GAPS IN INCLUSIVE HIGHER
EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM
COLLEGES IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM**

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled “*Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Higher Education: Perspectives from Colleges in Thiruvananthapuram.*” is a record of genuine work done by Ann Ajith, fourth semester Master of Social Work student of this college under my supervision and guidance and that it is hereby approved for submission.

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I, Ann Ajith, do here by declare that the Dissertation titled “*Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Higher Education: Perspectives from Colleges in Thiruvananthapuram*” is based on the original work carried out by me and submitted to the University of Kerala during the year 20242026 towards partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Social Work Degree Examination. It has not been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or other similar title of recognition before.

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive higher education has emerged as a significant educational priority in promoting equity, diversity, participation, and social justice. Although national policies such as the National Education Policy (2020), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and the University Grants Commission guidelines advocate inclusive education, their implementation within higher education institutions often remains inconsistent. This study, titled "Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Higher Education: Perspectives from Colleges in Thiruvananthapuram," examines the disconnect between inclusive education policies and their practical implementation in colleges, with particular emphasis on institutional practices and students' educational experiences.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach using a multiple case study research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of inclusion within higher education institutions. Purposive sampling was employed to select six participants comprising three students from marginalized backgrounds and three faculty members representing diverse institutional experiences. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, while secondary data were obtained from policy documents, books, journal articles, government reports, and related literature. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by the theoretical perspectives of the Theory of Equity in Education, Social Model of Disability, Intersectionality Theory, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

The findings reveal that although colleges have introduced several inclusive initiatives, substantial policy–practice gaps continue to exist. Participants identified barriers related to inaccessible infrastructure, limited awareness of institutional support services, rigid pedagogical practices, socio-cultural discrimination, inadequate faculty preparedness, and insufficient implementation of inclusive policies. The study further demonstrates that students' social and cultural identities significantly influence their educational experiences, engagement, participation, and sense of belonging. Informal peer support, supportive faculty relationships, and personal resilience emerged as important facilitators that enabled students to navigate institutional challenges despite systemic limitations.

The study concludes that inclusive higher education requires more than policy formulation. Meaningful inclusion demands sustained institutional commitment, accessible infrastructure, inclusive pedagogical practices, responsive student support systems, faculty capacity building, and continuous monitoring of policy implementation. The findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge on inclusive higher education and provide practical recommendations for policymakers, educational institutions, faculty members, and social work professionals to strengthen equitable, participatory, and student-centred learning environments within higher education institutions.

Keywords: Inclusive Higher Education, Institutional Inclusion, Student Engagement, Marginalized Students, Intersectionality, Higher Education, Thematic

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 Conceptual Foundations of Inclusive Education

Education is widely recognized as one of the most powerful instruments for social transformation, human development, and the promotion of equality. It enables individuals to acquire knowledge, skills, values, and opportunities necessary for meaningful participation in society. Beyond its role in individual advancement, education serves as a mechanism for reducing social inequalities, promoting social mobility, and fostering democratic citizenship. Within this broader understanding, inclusive education has emerged as a critical paradigm that seeks to ensure that all individuals, irrespective of their social, cultural, economic, or personal characteristics, are provided with equitable opportunities to access, participate in, and benefit from education. Inclusive education is therefore not merely an educational strategy but a commitment to social justice, human rights, and the recognition of diversity as an essential component of learning environments. (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 1948; United Nations, 2015)

The concept of inclusion has evolved considerably over time. Earlier approaches to education often viewed differences among learners through a deficit-oriented lens, focusing on limitations rather than strengths. Educational systems frequently segregated students perceived as different due to disability, social background, language, gender, or other characteristics. Such approaches reflected assumptions that educational institutions should remain unchanged while individuals were expected to adapt to existing structures. Over time, however, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners began to challenge these assumptions. The focus gradually shifted toward recognizing that exclusion often results not from individual deficits but from structural, institutional, and cultural barriers that limit participation and achievement. Consequently, inclusive education emerged as a framework that seeks to transform educational institutions so that diversity is accommodated, valued, and celebrated. (UNESCO, 1994; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Ainscow, 2005)

1.1.2 Contemporary Perspectives on Inclusive Education

In contemporary educational discourse, inclusion extends beyond physical access or enrollment. Merely providing admission to educational institutions does not guarantee meaningful participation or equitable outcomes. True inclusion involves creating environments where all learners experience a sense of belonging, are able to engage actively in academic and social life, and have opportunities to achieve their full potential. This broader understanding emphasizes participation, representation, engagement, achievement, and well-being. It recognizes that educational institutions must respond proactively to diversity by addressing barriers that hinder learning and participation. Inclusion therefore requires changes in institutional culture, policies, pedagogical practices, support systems, and interpersonal relationships. (UNESCO, 2020; Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2014)

1.1.3 Growing Importance of Inclusion in Higher Education

The significance of inclusive education has increased substantially in recent decades due to growing recognition of diversity within educational settings. Globalization, demographic changes, technological advancements, and social movements advocating equality have transformed educational institutions into increasingly diverse spaces. Students now come from varied socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, religious, gender, and ability backgrounds. Higher education institutions in particular have experienced significant diversification of their student populations. As access to education expands, universities and colleges are increasingly expected to serve learners with diverse identities, experiences, aspirations, and support needs. This growing diversity has reinforced the need for institutions to move beyond traditional educational models and adopt inclusive policies, pedagogical practices, and support systems that ensure equitable participation, engagement, and learning outcomes for all students. (McCowan, 2016; UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2019)

1.1.4 Significance of Inclusive Higher Education

Higher education occupies a unique position within society. It is not only a site for knowledge production and dissemination but also a pathway to economic opportunities, social mobility, and civic participation. Access to higher education can significantly influence life chances and contribute to reducing social inequalities. Consequently, inclusion within higher education is particularly important because exclusion at this level can have long-term consequences for individuals and communities. Students who encounter barriers in higher education may experience reduced academic achievement, limited employment opportunities, lower self-esteem, and diminished social participation. Conversely, inclusive educational environments can enhance learning outcomes, foster personal growth, and contribute to social cohesion

1.1.5 Inclusive Education in the Indian Context

In the Indian context, inclusive education has gained increasing attention as part of broader efforts to promote equity and social justice. India is characterized by immense diversity in terms of caste, class, religion, language, gender, ethnicity, and regional identities. At the same time, the country has historically experienced significant inequalities that have affected access to educational opportunities. Various social groups, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, persons with disabilities, women, religious minorities, and economically disadvantaged populations, have often faced barriers to educational participation. Recognizing these challenges, the Indian state has introduced numerous policies and initiatives aimed at promoting inclusion and reducing disparities in education. (Government of India, 2020; Singal, 2019; Julka, 2016)

1.1.6 Policy Framework for Inclusive Higher Education in India

Constitutional provisions form the foundation of inclusive education efforts in India. The Constitution guarantees equality before the law, prohibits discrimination, and promotes social justice through various safeguards and affirmative action measures. Educational policies have built upon these principles by introducing reservation systems, scholarship schemes, anti-discrimination measures, disability inclusion provisions, and initiatives aimed at expanding access for marginalized communities. More recently, policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy (2020) have emphasized equity, inclusion, flexibility, and learner-centered approaches. These developments reflect a growing recognition that educational systems must address structural barriers and create supportive environments for diverse learners. (Government of India, 2020; Government of India, 2016; UGC, 2018)

1.1.7 Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Higher Education

Despite these policy advancements, significant challenges remain in translating inclusive ideals into institutional practice. While access to higher education has improved for many marginalized groups, disparities continue to exist in participation, retention, engagement, and outcomes. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter barriers that extend beyond admission. These barriers may include financial constraints, inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory attitudes, lack of academic support, cultural marginalization, and limited representation within institutional structures. As a result, the expansion of access does not automatically lead to equitable educational experiences or outcomes. This disconnect highlights the importance of examining how inclusive policies are implemented and experienced within educational institutions. (McCowan, 2016; Kumari et al., 2024; Afsina & Joseph, 2024)

1.1.8 Kerala as a Context for Inclusive Higher Education

Kerala provides a particularly important context for examining issues of inclusion in higher education. The state has long been recognized for its achievements in literacy, educational attainment, and social development. High literacy rates, strong public investment in education, and progressive social policies have contributed to Kerala's reputation as a model of educational advancement. Over the years, educational opportunities have expanded significantly, enabling greater participation among historically marginalized groups. Nevertheless, the presence of educational opportunities does not necessarily guarantee inclusion. Structural inequalities, social hierarchies, and institutional barriers continue to influence educational experiences within the state. (Narayana et al., 2009; Government of Kerala, 2021; CSES, 2009)

1.1.9 Thiruvananthapuram as the Research Setting

Within Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram occupies a prominent position as a major educational center. The city hosts numerous colleges, universities, professional institutions, and research centers that attract students from diverse backgrounds. Increasing access to higher education has resulted in a student population characterized by considerable heterogeneity. Students differ in terms of caste, class, gender, religion, disability status, language, sexuality, and cultural background. This diversity underscores the need for institutions to adopt inclusive practices that accommodate varying needs and experiences. However, the extent to which institutions have adapted to this diversity remains an important question. (Government of Kerala, 2021; AISHE, 2022; UGC, 2023)

1.1.10 Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Higher Education

One of the central concerns in contemporary discussions of inclusive education is the existence of policy–practice gaps. Policies often articulate ambitious goals related to equity, accessibility, and inclusion, yet their implementation may be inconsistent or incomplete. Policy–practice gaps occur when institutional practices fail to reflect the principles and commitments embedded within policy frameworks. Such gaps may arise due to inadequate resources, lack of awareness, insufficient training, weak monitoring mechanisms, competing institutional priorities, or resistance to change. Understanding these gaps is essential because they influence how students experience educational environments and determine whether policy objectives are translated into meaningful outcomes.

In higher education institutions, policy–practice gaps may manifest in various ways. Accessibility measures may exist on paper but remain inadequately implemented. Institutions may establish committees or support mechanisms without ensuring their effective functioning. Faculty members may be expected to adopt inclusive pedagogical

approaches without receiving appropriate training or resources. Students may be formally protected from discrimination while continuing to encounter exclusionary attitudes and practices in everyday interactions. These examples illustrate how symbolic commitments to inclusion can coexist with persistent barriers to participation and achievement. (Afsina & Joseph, 2024; Mittal & Goel, 2024; Lakshmi, 2024)

1.1.11 Accessibility and Inclusive Learning Environments

Physical accessibility remains a critical dimension of inclusion. Educational institutions are expected to provide infrastructure that enables all students to participate fully in academic and social activities. This includes accessible classrooms, ramps, lifts, assistive technologies, accessible transportation, and supportive learning environments. However, many institutions continue to face infrastructural limitations that restrict access for students with disabilities. Inaccessible environments can hinder mobility, participation, and independence, thereby undermining educational opportunities. From an inclusive perspective, accessibility should be viewed not as a special provision but as a fundamental requirement for equitable participation. (United Nations, 2006; Government of India, 2016; Yenduri et al., 2023)

1.1.12 Inclusive Pedagogy and Teaching–Learning Practices

Equally important are pedagogical practices that accommodate diverse learning needs. Inclusive education requires teaching approaches that recognize differences in learning styles, abilities, backgrounds, and experiences. Traditional pedagogical models often assume homogeneity among learners and rely heavily on standardized methods of instruction and assessment. Such approaches may disadvantage students who require alternative forms of engagement, representation, or expression. Inclusive pedagogy seeks to address these limitations by promoting flexibility, responsiveness, and learner-centered practices. Approaches such as Universal Design for Learning emphasize the importance of providing multiple pathways for learning and participation, thereby enhancing accessibility and engagement for all students. (CAST, 2018; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Lakshmi, 2024)

1.1.13 Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Inclusion

Socio-cultural dimensions of inclusion are equally significant. Educational experiences are shaped not only by institutional structures but also by social relationships, cultural norms, and power dynamics. Students may encounter subtle or overt forms of exclusion based on caste, gender, language, religion, disability, sexuality, or socio-economic status. Such experiences can affect self-confidence, sense of belonging, academic engagement, and overall well-being. Unlike physical barriers, socio-cultural barriers are often less visible yet equally consequential. Addressing inclusion therefore requires attention to

institutional culture, interpersonal interactions, and broader social contexts. (Majumdar, 2023; Mathews, 2022; UNESCO, 2020)

1.1.14 Intersectionality as a Lens for Understanding Inclusion

The concept of intersectionality provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexity of exclusion and inclusion. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality highlights how multiple social identities interact to shape experiences of privilege and disadvantage. Individuals rarely experience exclusion based on a single identity category. Instead, factors such as caste, class, gender, disability, sexuality, and religion often intersect, creating unique experiences and challenges. For example, a student with a disability from an economically disadvantaged background may face different barriers than a student who experiences only one form of marginalization. An intersectional perspective therefore enables a more nuanced understanding of diversity and inclusion within higher education. (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2020)

1.1.15 Student Engagement in Inclusive Higher Education

Student engagement represents another important dimension of inclusive education. Engagement refers to the extent to which students participate in academic, social, and institutional activities. It encompasses behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Inclusive educational environments are more likely to foster engagement by creating conditions that support participation, belonging, and motivation. Conversely, exclusionary environments may contribute to disengagement, absenteeism, lower academic performance, and withdrawal. Examining engagement provides insight into how students experience educational environments and how institutional practices influence their participation. (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010)

1.1.16 Learning Outcomes and Inclusive Higher Education

Learning outcomes constitute a further area of concern. Inclusive education aims not only to increase access but also to ensure that all students can achieve meaningful educational outcomes. Learning outcomes include academic achievement, knowledge acquisition, skill development, critical thinking, personal growth, and preparation for future opportunities. Persistent disparities in learning outcomes may indicate underlying barriers that affect participation and success. Understanding the relationship between institutional practices and learning outcomes is therefore essential for evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives. (Biggs & Tang, 2011; McCowan, 2016; Lakshmi, 2024)

1.1.17 Theoretical Perspectives on Inclusive Higher Education

Theoretical perspectives offer important tools for analyzing these issues. The Social Model of Disability challenges deficit-based understandings of disability by emphasizing the role of societal barriers in creating exclusion. Rather than viewing disability as an individual problem, the model highlights how inaccessible environments and discriminatory attitudes restrict participation. This perspective shifts responsibility from individuals to institutions and societies, encouraging structural change.

Intersectionality theory provides a framework for examining how multiple identities interact to shape educational experiences. By recognizing overlapping forms of marginalization, intersectionality enables researchers to move beyond simplistic explanations of inequality and understand the complexity of exclusion within diverse educational settings.

Universal Design for Learning contributes a pedagogical perspective by emphasizing flexibility and accessibility in teaching and learning. UDL advocates the provision of multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to accommodate diverse learners. This framework supports the creation of learning environments that are responsive to variation rather than dependent on standardized assumptions.

Together, these theoretical perspectives underscore the importance of viewing inclusion as a multidimensional process involving structural, cultural, and pedagogical transformation. They highlight the need to move beyond narrow understandings of access and consider broader questions of participation, engagement, representation, and achievement.

1.1.18 Context of the Present Study

Against this backdrop, the present study examines policy–practice gaps in inclusive higher education within colleges in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. The study is grounded in the recognition that inclusion is shaped by the interaction of policies, institutional practices, socio-cultural dynamics, and individual experiences. It seeks to understand how inclusive education is conceptualized, interpreted, and implemented within higher education institutions and how these processes influence student engagement and learning outcomes. The study places particular emphasis on the experiences of students from diverse and marginalized backgrounds. (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2020)

1.1.19 Importance of Understanding Students' Lived Experiences

The focus on marginalized student experiences is particularly important because educational inequalities are often obscured by aggregate indicators of enrollment and

completion. While statistical measures may suggest progress toward educational inclusion, they do not always reveal the everyday realities encountered by students within institutional environments. Experiences of exclusion may occur through subtle processes such as stereotyping, invisibility, lack of representation, unequal expectations, and restricted access to opportunities. Such experiences may not be formally documented, yet they significantly shape students' educational trajectories. Understanding these lived experiences is therefore essential for assessing the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives and identifying areas requiring institutional reform. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991)

1.1.20 Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

Furthermore, the contemporary understanding of inclusion emphasizes the importance of belonging. Belonging refers to the extent to which individuals feel accepted, valued, respected, and supported within a community. Within higher education, a strong sense of belonging contributes positively to academic motivation, persistence, engagement, and psychological well-being. Students who perceive themselves as outsiders or who experience discrimination are more likely to disengage from academic activities and institutional life. Consequently, inclusive education requires institutions to create environments where diversity is acknowledged and where all students can develop a meaningful sense of connection with their educational community. (Strayhorn, 2019; Kahu, 2013; UNESCO, 2020)

1.1.21 Institutional Culture and Inclusive Practice

The role of institutional culture is central to this process. Institutional culture encompasses the values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape everyday interactions within educational settings. Even when formal policies support inclusion, exclusionary institutional cultures can undermine implementation efforts. For example, discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes, and implicit biases may persist despite official commitments to equality. These cultural dimensions influence how policies are interpreted, how resources are allocated, and how students experience institutional environments. Therefore, examining institutional culture provides important insights into the factors that facilitate or hinder inclusive education. (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Schein & Schein, 2021; UNESCO, 2020)

1.1.22 Role of Faculty in Promoting Inclusion

Faculty members play a particularly significant role in shaping inclusive educational experiences. As primary facilitators of learning, educators influence classroom environments, student engagement, and academic success. Inclusive teaching involves recognizing diversity among learners and adopting pedagogical strategies that promote

participation and achievement for all students. Faculty attitudes toward inclusion can significantly affect student experiences. Supportive educators can foster confidence, motivation, and belonging, while exclusionary practices may reinforce marginalization. However, many educators face challenges in implementing inclusive approaches due to limited training, insufficient resources, or institutional constraints. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing effective strategies to strengthen inclusive pedagogy. (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Lakshmi, 2024; Ainscow, 2020)

1.1.23 Institutional Support Systems and Student Inclusion

In addition to faculty, institutional support services contribute substantially to educational inclusion. Support systems such as counseling centers, scholarship programs, mentoring initiatives, disability support services, equal opportunity cells, and student welfare programs can help address barriers faced by diverse learners. These services provide practical assistance while also signaling institutional commitment to inclusion. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of support services depends on factors such as accessibility, awareness, coordination, and responsiveness. Students may be unable to benefit from available services if they are unaware of them or if access procedures are complex and burdensome. Consequently, the presence of support mechanisms alone does not guarantee inclusion; their functionality and accessibility are equally important. (Afsina & Joseph, 2024; UNESCO, 2020; UGC, 2018)

1.1.24 Technology and Digital Inclusion in Higher Education

Technology has emerged as another important dimension of inclusive education. Digital technologies offer significant potential for enhancing accessibility, flexibility, and participation. Online learning platforms, assistive technologies, adaptive software, captioning systems, and digital resources can support diverse learning needs and improve educational access. For students with disabilities, technology can reduce barriers and facilitate participation in academic activities. For students from geographically distant or disadvantaged backgrounds, digital platforms may provide new opportunities for learning and engagement. However, technological inclusion is also shaped by issues such as affordability, digital literacy, infrastructure, and access to devices. The digital divide therefore remains a critical concern in discussions of educational equity. (Yenduri et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2021)

1.1.25 Digital Inclusion and the Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted both the possibilities and limitations of technology-mediated education. During the pandemic, educational institutions relied extensively on digital platforms to maintain continuity of learning. While technology enabled educational activities to continue, it also exposed existing inequalities related to

internet access, digital skills, and learning environments. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often faced greater challenges in participating effectively in online education. These experiences reinforced the importance of viewing inclusion through a holistic lens that considers technological, economic, social, and institutional factors simultaneously. (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2020)

1.1.26 Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-Being in Inclusive Higher Education

Another significant dimension of inclusive education relates to mental health and psychosocial well-being. Higher education can be associated with various stressors, including academic pressure, financial challenges, identity-related concerns, and social adjustment difficulties. Students from marginalized backgrounds may face additional stressors arising from discrimination, stigma, or exclusion. Mental health challenges can affect concentration, motivation, attendance, and academic performance. Inclusive educational environments therefore require attention not only to academic needs but also to psychosocial support and emotional well-being. Institutions that prioritize student well-being are better positioned to foster engagement, resilience, and success. (WHO, 2022; Strayhorn, 2019; UNESCO, 2021)

1.1.27 Inclusive Education and Social Justice

The relationship between inclusion and social justice is also central to this study. Social justice emphasizes fairness, equity, participation, and recognition within social institutions. Inclusive education can be understood as a practical expression of social justice within educational contexts. It seeks to challenge systemic inequalities and create opportunities for all learners to participate meaningfully in education. From a social work perspective, inclusive education aligns closely with professional values related to human dignity, empowerment, social justice, and advocacy. Educational institutions have a responsibility not only to provide access but also to address structural barriers that limit participation and achievement. (Rawls, 1971; Fraser, 2008; IFSW & IASSW, 2014)

1.1.28 Social Work Perspective on Inclusive Higher Education

Social work perspectives are particularly valuable in understanding inclusive education because they emphasize the interaction between individuals and their environments. Rather than attributing educational challenges solely to individual characteristics, social work approaches consider the broader social, cultural, economic, and institutional contexts that shape experiences and outcomes. This ecological perspective highlights the importance of addressing systemic factors such as discrimination, poverty, inaccessible infrastructure, and exclusionary policies. It also emphasizes strengths, resilience, and empowerment, recognizing the capacities of individuals and communities to overcome

challenges and contribute to positive change. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Germain & Gitterman, 1996; IFSW, 2014)

1.1.29 Qualitative Orientation of the Study

The present study adopts a qualitative orientation because qualitative approaches are particularly well suited to exploring complex social phenomena such as inclusion and exclusion. Quantitative indicators can provide valuable information regarding access, enrollment, and achievement, but they may not capture the meanings, perceptions, and experiences associated with educational participation. Qualitative inquiry allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences and navigate institutional environments. By focusing on narratives and lived experiences, qualitative research can reveal dimensions of inclusion that might otherwise remain invisible. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018)

The relevance of this study extends beyond the specific context of Thiruvananthapuram. While the research is situated within a particular geographical and institutional setting, the issues it addresses resonate with broader debates concerning equity and inclusion in higher education. Educational institutions across India and globally are grappling with questions related to diversity, accessibility, representation, and student success. Findings from localized studies can therefore contribute to wider discussions by providing context-specific insights that enrich understanding of inclusive education in diverse settings. (McCowan, 2016; UNESCO, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018)

1.1.30 Focus on Participation and Educational Outcomes

Moreover, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to shift the focus of inclusive education from access alone to participation and outcomes. Historically, educational reforms have often emphasized increasing enrollment among marginalized groups. While expanding access remains important, inclusion requires attention to what happens after students enter educational institutions. Participation, engagement, achievement, belonging, and well-being are equally important indicators of educational equity. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion within higher education. (McCowan, 2016; UNESCO, 2020; Kahu, 2013)

1.1.31 Inclusion as a Continuous Process

The research also recognizes that inclusion is an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome. Educational institutions operate within dynamic social environments characterized by changing demographics, evolving policy frameworks, technological developments, and shifting cultural norms. Consequently, inclusive education requires continuous reflection, adaptation, and improvement. Institutions must regularly evaluate

their practices, identify emerging barriers, and develop responsive strategies that address the needs of diverse learners. This process demands commitment, leadership, collaboration, and accountability at multiple levels. (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; UNESCO, 2021)

1.1.32 Diversity as a Strength in Higher Education

Importantly, the study views diversity as a strength rather than a challenge. Diverse educational environments create opportunities for dialogue, innovation, critical thinking, and mutual learning. Students benefit from exposure to different perspectives, experiences, and worldviews. Inclusive institutions harness this diversity to enrich learning experiences and promote social cohesion. Rather than seeking uniformity, inclusive education recognizes and values difference as an essential component of educational excellence.

1.1.33 Inclusive Higher Education as a Social Justice Imperative

Ultimately, inclusive higher education represents more than a policy objective; it reflects a broader commitment to creating societies characterized by equality, dignity, participation, and opportunity. Educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping future generations and influencing social development. When institutions embrace inclusion, they contribute not only to individual success but also to broader goals of social justice and democratic participation. Conversely, when barriers to inclusion persist, educational inequalities can reinforce wider patterns of social exclusion and disadvantage. (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2019; Ainscow, 2020)

1.1.34 Rationale for the Present Study

Therefore, examining policy–practice gaps in inclusive higher education is both timely and necessary. Understanding how inclusion is experienced, implemented, and challenged within educational institutions can inform efforts to create more equitable and responsive learning environments. Through an intersectional analysis of institutional practices and their impact on student engagement and learning outcomes, this study seeks to contribute to the development of higher education systems that genuinely reflect the principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice. In doing so, it emphasizes that meaningful inclusion requires not only policy commitments but also sustained institutional action, cultural transformation, and collective responsibility for ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive. (Crenshaw, 1991; McCowan, 2016; UNESCO, 2020)

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The discourse on inclusive education in India has gained significant momentum in recent years, particularly following the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes equitable access, participation, inclusion, and quality learning for all students. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE 2021–2022), India has 1,168 universities, over 45,000 colleges, and approximately 43.3 million students enrolled in higher education. Although enrolment has steadily increased, access alone has not ensured equitable educational experiences for students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2024).

India has made considerable progress in expanding participation through reservation policies and affirmative action. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education increased to 28.4% during 2021–22 compared to 27.3% in 2020–21. However, disparities continue to exist across different social groups. The GER for Scheduled Castes (SC) is approximately 25.9%, for Scheduled Tribes (ST) around 21.2%, and for students with disabilities remains substantially lower than the national average. These figures indicate that while access has improved, significant inequalities persist in higher education participation and completion (AISHE, 2021–22).

Despite progressive policy frameworks, there exists a critical gap in understanding how inclusive education policies are implemented at the institutional level, particularly within specific regional contexts such as Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Existing literature on inclusive education in Kerala remains relatively limited and is largely concentrated on policy discussions or school education. Few empirical studies have examined how inclusion is experienced within higher education institutions or explored the relationship between institutional practices, student engagement, and learning outcomes.

Kerala is internationally recognized for its achievements in literacy and educational development. According to the Economic Review 2023, Kerala continues to maintain a literacy rate of over 96%, one of the highest in India. The state also records one of the highest higher education participation rates in the country. However, increased access has not necessarily translated into equitable participation for all students. Educational institutions continue to encounter challenges related to accessibility, inclusive pedagogy, faculty preparedness, assistive technologies, and institutional support systems.

Although higher education policies emphasize inclusion, implementation often remains fragmented and inconsistent. In many institutions, inclusion is interpreted primarily in terms of admission through reservation policies, while broader dimensions such as participation, representation, engagement, belonging, accessibility, and academic success receive comparatively less attention. Consequently, students from marginalized backgrounds including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, persons with disabilities, economically weaker sections, women, and LGBTQIA+ students may gain access to higher education but continue to experience barriers that limit their educational experiences.

Institutional practices further reflect this policy–practice gap. Many colleges continue to lack comprehensive accessibility infrastructure, inclusive curriculum design, trained faculty, assistive technologies, and structured institutional mechanisms for supporting diverse learners. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), many countries, including India, continue to experience significant disparities between inclusive education policies and their implementation due to inadequate resources, insufficient institutional preparedness, and weak monitoring systems.

Students from marginalized backgrounds frequently experience multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion. These barriers extend beyond physical accessibility to include discrimination, stereotyping, stigma, financial constraints, language barriers, lack of representation, limited peer acceptance, and reduced opportunities for participation. Such experiences influence students' academic engagement, psychological well-being, sense of belonging, retention, and learning outcomes. Since these barriers often operate simultaneously, understanding them requires an intersectional perspective rather than examining individual identities in isolation.

Furthermore, institutional support mechanisms such as counseling centres, Equal Opportunity Cells, disability support services, mentoring programmes, scholarships, and grievance redressal systems frequently remain underutilized because of limited awareness, inadequate coordination, procedural barriers, and inconsistent implementation. The absence of systematic monitoring and evaluation further widens the gap between policy intentions and institutional realities.

Given these concerns, there is a pressing need for context-specific empirical research examining how inclusive education policies are translated into practice within colleges in Thiruvananthapuram. Existing studies provide limited understanding of how institutional practices influence student engagement,

participation, belonging, and learning outcomes within local higher education settings. By examining these issues through an intersectional qualitative lens, the present study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap and generate evidence that can strengthen institutional practices, inform policy implementation, and contribute to the development of more equitable and inclusive higher education systems.

1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The concept of inclusive education has evolved significantly over time, moving from a focus on integration and special education to a broader framework that emphasizes equity, diversity, and systemic transformation. In higher education, this evolution reflects a growing recognition that diversity is not a challenge to be managed but a resource to be valued and integrated into institutional practices.

Theoretical frameworks provide a strong foundation for understanding inclusive education. The Social Model of Disability challenges the traditional medical model by emphasizing that disability is not an individual limitation but a result of societal barriers. This perspective shifts the focus from “fixing the individual” to transforming institutional environments.

Similarly, the concept of Intersectionality highlights how multiple forms of disadvantage such as caste, gender, class, and disability interact to shape individuals’ experiences. This framework is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where social hierarchies and inequalities are deeply embedded.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework further contributes to inclusive education by advocating for flexible teaching methods that accommodate diverse learning needs. It emphasizes multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to learn.

In Thiruvananthapuram, the higher education landscape reflects broader social transformations, including increased access to education for marginalized groups. However, institutional transformation has not kept pace with these changes. Structural inequalities, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder inclusive participation.

This study is situated within this context, aiming to explore how inclusive education is practiced and experienced within colleges, and how these practices influence student outcomes.

1.4 RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The present study is significant because it addresses an important gap in the existing literature on inclusive higher education by examining the disconnect between policy provisions and their implementation within colleges in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. While inclusive education has received increasing attention through national policies and international commitments, relatively few studies have explored how these policies are translated into everyday institutional practices within higher education. By focusing on the lived experiences of students and the perspectives of faculty members, the study generates context-specific evidence regarding the realities of inclusion, participation, and student engagement. It thereby contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education in higher education institutions.

Academically, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive higher education by adopting an intersectional and qualitative approach. Existing research has largely concentrated on access to education, policy analysis, or school-level inclusion, while comparatively limited attention has been given to institutional practices, student engagement, and learning outcomes within higher education settings. The study broadens the understanding of inclusion by examining it as a multidimensional concept encompassing accessibility, participation, belonging, engagement, representation, and academic success. By integrating the perspectives of both students and faculty members, the study enriches theoretical and empirical discussions on inclusive education and provides a foundation for future research in higher education, social work, and educational policy.

The study is particularly relevant within the context of Kerala, where high literacy rates and educational achievements often create the perception that educational inclusion has already been achieved. Despite these accomplishments, students continue to encounter structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural barriers that affect their educational experiences. The findings therefore provide valuable insights into the realities of inclusion within colleges in Thiruvananthapuram and demonstrate that expanding access alone does not necessarily ensure equitable participation, engagement, or learning outcomes. The study highlights the need to move beyond enrolment statistics and examine the quality of students' educational experiences within institutional environments.

From a social work perspective, the study has considerable relevance because it is grounded in the profession's commitment to social justice, human rights, equity, dignity, and empowerment. Social work recognizes education as an important determinant of individual well-being, social inclusion, and community development. The findings contribute to social work knowledge by identifying the structural and psychosocial barriers

experienced by marginalized students and by highlighting the importance of advocacy, resource mobilization, psychosocial support, and institutional collaboration. The study reinforces the role of professional social workers in promoting inclusive educational environments through counseling, advocacy, case management, community engagement, policy implementation, and interdisciplinary collaboration within higher education institutions.

The study is also significant for educational institutions and college administrators. It provides empirical evidence regarding the strengths and limitations of existing institutional practices related to inclusive education. The findings identify areas requiring improvement, including accessible infrastructure, faculty preparedness, student support services, institutional policies, grievance redressal mechanisms, and inclusive campus cultures. These insights can assist administrators in developing strategic plans, strengthening institutional policies, and establishing comprehensive frameworks that promote equitable participation for students from diverse social, cultural, linguistic, economic, gender, disability, and minority backgrounds.

For policymakers, the study provides evidence that can contribute to strengthening the implementation of inclusive education policies within higher education. Although national policies such as the National Education Policy (2020), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and University Grants Commission guidelines emphasize inclusion, challenges remain in translating these policy commitments into institutional practice. The findings identify implementation gaps and provide recommendations that may support policy refinement, improved monitoring mechanisms, effective resource allocation, institutional accountability, and stronger collaboration among educational stakeholders. The study therefore contributes to bridging the gap between policy formulation and practical implementation.

The findings are equally relevant for faculty members and educators. The study emphasizes the critical role that teachers play in creating inclusive learning environments through their attitudes, teaching methods, assessment practices, and interactions with students. It highlights the importance of adopting inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies that accommodate diverse learning needs and promote equitable participation. The findings encourage educators to move beyond traditional teacher-centred approaches and embrace flexible instructional strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), collaborative learning, differentiated instruction, and student-centred teaching practices. By strengthening faculty awareness and professional competence, institutions can improve student engagement, academic achievement, and overall learning experiences.

The study also contributes significantly to student welfare and support services. The findings demonstrate the importance of counseling centres, Equal Opportunity Cells, disability support services, mentoring programmes, financial assistance, and psychosocial interventions in promoting inclusion. By identifying barriers related to awareness, accessibility, and utilization of these services, the study provides practical recommendations for improving institutional support systems. Strengthening these mechanisms can enhance students' sense of belonging, resilience, emotional well-being, and academic persistence, particularly among students from marginalized and underrepresented communities.

The research has broader societal significance because higher education institutions play a crucial role in shaping democratic values, social cohesion, and inclusive citizenship. Educational institutions prepare future professionals, leaders, and decision-makers whose attitudes toward diversity influence wider society. Institutions that successfully promote inclusion contribute to reducing discrimination, strengthening mutual respect, encouraging intercultural dialogue, and fostering social integration. Consequently, improving inclusive education has implications not only for educational institutions but also for social development, equality, and nation-building.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative multiple case study research in exploring complex educational issues. By capturing the lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of students and faculty members, the research provides rich contextual insights that cannot be obtained through quantitative indicators alone. The use of thematic analysis allows for a deeper understanding of institutional practices, policy implementation, and socio-cultural dynamics influencing inclusive education. This methodological contribution may guide future researchers interested in qualitative inquiry within higher education and social work research.

The study further contributes to achieving national and international development goals related to education, equality, and social justice. Its findings support the objectives of the National Education Policy (2020), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD), and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which advocate inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. By generating context-specific evidence on the implementation of inclusive education, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to strengthen educational systems that are equitable, accessible, participatory, and responsive to diversity.

Overall, the significance of the study lies in its ability to bridge theory, policy, and practice. It provides valuable empirical evidence regarding the policy–practice gaps that continue to affect inclusive higher education while offering practical recommendations for

strengthening institutional practices. The study contributes to academic scholarship, informs educational policy, enhances professional social work practice, supports institutional development, and ultimately promotes the creation of higher education environments where every student, regardless of social, cultural, economic, or identity-based differences can participate meaningfully, experience a sense of belonging, achieve academic success, and realize their full potential.

1.5 CHAPTERIZATION

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter lays the conceptual and contextual foundation of the study. It introduces the concept of inclusive education within higher education and situates it within the broader framework of equity, social justice, and human rights. The chapter elaborates on the background of the study, highlighting the growing diversity within colleges in Thiruvananthapuram and the need for inclusive institutional practices. It clearly presents the statement of the problem, emphasizing the gap between policy and practice in inclusive education. The chapter also discusses the relevance and significance of the study from academic, policy, and social work perspectives. Additionally, it outlines the scope and limitations of the research, providing clarity on the boundaries within which the study is conducted.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This chapter critically examines existing literature related to inclusive education in higher education. It explores key theoretical frameworks such as the Social Model of Disability, Intersectionality, and Universal Design for Learning, which guide the conceptual understanding of inclusion. The chapter reviews national and international studies that address issues of access, equity, discrimination, pedagogical practices, and institutional challenges. It also analyzes literature specific to the Indian and Kerala context, identifying gaps in localized research, particularly in relation to Thiruvananthapuram. By synthesizing previous studies, the chapter establishes the research gap and provides a strong theoretical and empirical basis for the present study.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted for the study. It describes the research design, which is qualitative in nature, and justifies its suitability for exploring lived experiences and institutional practices. The chapter details the sampling strategy, including the selection of respondents (students and teachers) based on criteria such as diversity and representation. It explains the tools and techniques used for data collection, such as semi-structured interviews and case studies. The process of data collection, ethical considerations, and issues of confidentiality are also discussed. Furthermore, the chapter

elaborates on the methods of data analysis, including thematic analysis, and explains how data was systematically organized and interpreted to derive meaningful insights.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter presents the findings derived from the field data in a systematic and organized manner. It includes detailed case presentations of respondents, highlighting their demographic profiles and lived experiences within higher education institutions. The data is analyzed using thematic categorization, identifying recurring patterns related to inclusion, exclusion, institutional practices, and student engagement. The chapter focuses on interpreting the narratives of both students and teachers, providing insights into how inclusive education is experienced at the ground level. It also links empirical observations with broader concepts of equity and inclusion, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in both data and theory.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Findings

This chapter integrates the findings from the data analysis with theoretical frameworks and existing literature. It provides an in-depth discussion of the major themes identified in the study, such as policy– practice gaps, structural barriers, pedagogical rigidities, intersectional marginalization, and institutional limitations. The chapter critically examines how these factors influence student engagement and learning outcomes. It also compares the study findings with previous research, highlighting similarities, differences, and new insights. The discussion emphasizes the role of institutional structures, sociocultural dynamics, and policy frameworks in shaping inclusive education. Overall, this chapter provides a comprehensive interpretation of the study’s findings in relation to its objectives.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the study and presents the overall conclusions. It reflects on the extent to which the research objectives have been achieved and highlights the central issues identified, particularly the gap between inclusive policies and their implementation. The chapter provides practical recommendations for improving inclusive education in higher education institutions, focusing on areas such as infrastructure development, inclusive pedagogy, faculty training, and strengthening support systems. It also suggests policy-level interventions and institutional reforms to address existing challenges. Additionally, the chapter outlines implications for social work practice, emphasizing advocacy, empowerment, and community engagement. Finally, it suggests directions for future research, encouraging further studies to build on the findings and contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable higher education systems.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of inclusive education has gained significant prominence in contemporary educational discourse, particularly within higher education, where increasing diversity among student populations necessitates institutional transformation. Inclusive education extends beyond mere access to education; it emphasizes equity, participation, representation, and achievement of meaningful learning outcomes for all students, especially those from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Existing literature indicates that inclusive education is shaped by a complex interaction of structural inequalities, institutional practices, policy frameworks, and socio-cultural dynamics. Scholars have highlighted that despite the presence of progressive policies, the implementation of inclusive education often remains inconsistent and fragmented. This gap between policy intent and practice is particularly evident in higher education institutions, where diversity in student populations is not always matched by inclusive institutional responses.

Studies such as McCowan (2016) emphasize disparities in access and equity, while Kumari et al. (2024) highlight the need for comprehensive inclusive frameworks in India. Research focusing on Kerala, including Narayana et al. (2009), points to a shift from inclusive to exclusionary trends within the education system, influenced by privatization and structural barriers. At the same time, emerging studies underline the role of innovative pedagogy (Lakshmi, 2024), assistive technologies (Yenduri et al., 2023), and gender-inclusive policies (Mittal & Goel, 2024) in enhancing inclusion.

However, persistent challenges such as discrimination, inadequate institutional support, lack of faculty training, and socio-cultural barriers including stigma and bullying continue to affect marginalized students' participation and academic outcomes. Studies like Afsina and Joseph (2024) and Mathews (2022) highlight these challenges, while works such as Majumdar (2023) draw attention to subtle forms of bias such as colourism that influence social interactions within educational spaces.

This chapter critically reviews the existing literature to understand the theoretical foundations, empirical findings, and research gaps related to inclusive education, particularly in higher education contexts.

2.2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Equity and Access in Higher Education

McCowan (2016) conceptualizes equity in higher education through three interconnected dimensions: availability, accessibility, and horizontality. Availability refers to the existence of educational opportunities and institutions; accessibility concerns the extent to which individuals can access these opportunities irrespective of their socio-economic background; and horizontality emphasizes equality in educational outcomes and experiences. The study argues that higher education systems often focus on expanding access while neglecting disparities in participation, retention, and achievement.

According to McCowan, access alone cannot be considered an indicator of educational equity. Structural inequalities related to class, caste, gender, and cultural capital continue to influence educational trajectories even after students gain admission. Students from privileged backgrounds often possess greater academic preparedness, social networks, and institutional familiarity, which contribute to their success. In contrast, marginalized students frequently encounter barriers that limit their participation and achievement.

The study is particularly significant because it shifts the focus from quantitative measures of enrollment to qualitative dimensions of educational experience. It highlights how educational institutions may reproduce existing inequalities despite formal commitments to inclusion. This perspective is highly relevant to the present study, which seeks to examine not only access but also student engagement and learning outcomes. McCowan's framework provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding how institutional practices shape inclusion and exclusion within higher education.

2. Inclusive Education in the Indian Context

Kumari, Bika, and Bhesera (2024) provide a comprehensive review of inclusive education research in India, tracing its evolution from special education approaches toward more integrated and inclusive models. The authors argue that despite progressive policy frameworks, implementation remains fragmented and inconsistent across educational settings.

The study critiques the continued reliance on a "one-size-fits-all" approach to education. Traditional educational systems often assume homogeneity among learners and fail to recognize diverse learning needs. Students with disabilities, learning difficulties, linguistic differences, and socio-economic disadvantages frequently encounter barriers that hinder meaningful participation.

The authors emphasize that inclusive education should create a least restrictive environment where all learners can participate together while receiving appropriate support. However, significant challenges persist, including inadequate teacher training,

inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive technologies, and limited awareness regarding inclusive pedagogical practices.

A major contribution of this study is its identification of the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. While policy documents advocate inclusion, educational institutions often lack the resources and capacity required for effective implementation. This finding directly supports the present study's focus on policy–practice gaps and highlights the importance of examining institutional realities rather than relying solely on policy provisions.

3. Gender Inclusion and Institutional Practices

Anitha and Harini (2025) examine gender-inclusive practices within higher education institutions in Bangalore. Their study explores the relationship between gender parity, educational participation, and workforce development. The findings indicate substantial progress in female enrollment and educational attainment, yet persistent inequalities remain in terms of leadership opportunities, institutional representation, and career outcomes.

The authors identify several practices that contribute to gender inclusion, including mentorship programmes, gender-sensitive policies, anti-harassment mechanisms, and institutional support services. These initiatives were found to enhance students' confidence, participation, and academic engagement. However, the study also reveals significant institutional disparities. While some institutions actively promote gender inclusion, others continue to operate within patriarchal structures that limit opportunities for women. Cultural expectations, gender stereotypes, and unequal power relations continue to influence educational experiences.

The study is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that inclusion extends beyond access and requires structural and cultural transformation. It also highlights the importance of intersectionality, as gender often interacts with caste, class, religion, and disability to shape educational experiences. These insights contribute to understanding how multiple forms of marginalization influence student engagement and learning outcomes.

4. Exclusionary Trends in Kerala's Education System

Narayana, George, and CSES India (2009) provide a critical examination of Kerala's education system, arguing that it has gradually shifted from a model characterized by social inclusion toward one marked by increasing exclusion. The study identifies several structural factors contributing to this transition. First, rising private costs of education have created financial barriers for economically disadvantaged students. Second, the expansion of self-financing institutions has increased educational commercialization and reduced accessibility. Third, non-financial barriers, including cultural and institutional factors,

continue to restrict participation among marginalized groups. Finally, inadequate attention to disadvantaged populations has contributed to persistent inequalities.

The authors argue that neoliberal reforms and privatization have significantly influenced educational access and equity. Although Kerala maintains high literacy rates and educational indicators, disparities remain evident in higher education participation and outcomes.

This study is particularly important for the present research because it provides context-specific insights into educational inequalities within Kerala. Its findings suggest that educational expansion alone does not guarantee inclusion and highlight the need to examine how institutional practices affect marginalized students in contemporary higher education settings.

5. Pedagogical Innovations and Student Engagement

Lakshmi (2024) investigates the relationship between innovative teaching strategies and student engagement in higher education. The study focuses on student-centered pedagogical approaches such as collaborative learning, problem-based learning, experiential learning, and participatory classroom practices.

The findings indicate that innovative teaching methods significantly improve student participation, motivation, critical thinking, and academic performance. Students exposed to interactive learning environments demonstrated higher levels of engagement compared to those taught through traditional lecture-based methods.

However, the study identifies several barriers to implementation. Teachers often lack adequate training in innovative pedagogies, institutional support is limited, and rigid curricular structures restrict flexibility. Additionally, some students initially resist unfamiliar learning approaches due to prior educational experiences.

The study aligns closely with Universal Design for learning principles, which advocate multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. It reinforces the argument that inclusive pedagogy plays a critical role in addressing diverse learning needs and improving educational outcomes.

6. Gender Identity and Inclusion of Transgender Students

Mittal and Goel (2024) examine the educational experiences of transgender students within Indian higher education institutions. Their analysis is situated within the broader context of legal reforms, including the NALSA Judgment (2014) and provisions of the National Education Policy (2020).

The study reveals that transgender students continue to face substantial barriers despite legal recognition. These include discrimination, social stigma, bullying, and exclusion from campus activities, inadequate institutional support, and lack of representation within educational structures.

The authors argue that inclusion requires more than administrative recognition. Effective inclusion involves creating safe spaces, implementing gender-sensitive policies, promoting awareness programmes, and ensuring representation of gender-diverse individuals within institutional decision-making processes. This study is particularly relevant because it highlights how formal inclusion measures may coexist with everyday experiences of exclusion. It demonstrates the importance of examining lived experiences alongside policy provisions and contributes to an intersectional understanding of educational inequality.

7. Role of Assistive Technologies in Inclusion

Yenduri et al. (2023) explore the role of assistive technologies in enhancing educational accessibility for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The study examines a range of technologies, including adaptive software, digital learning platforms, assistive communication tools, and emerging technologies such as virtual learning environments. The findings suggest that assistive technologies significantly improve participation, academic achievement, and learner autonomy. Students using appropriate technological supports demonstrated increased confidence and engagement in educational activities. Despite these benefits, several challenges remain. Limited institutional investment, lack of awareness, inadequate training, and financial constraints restrict access to assistive technologies. Many institutions continue to rely on traditional learning systems that fail to accommodate diverse needs. The study emphasizes that technological inclusion is a crucial component of educational equity. Its findings support the Social Model of Disability by demonstrating how environmental adaptations can reduce barriers and facilitate participation.

8. Perspectives on Inclusive Education and Institutional Challenges

Afsina and Joseph (2024) investigate inclusive education from the perspectives of parents and teachers of differently abled students. The study provides valuable insights into the practical realities of implementing inclusive education. Participants identified several challenges, including curriculum adaptation difficulties, inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient resources, lack of institutional support, and social barriers such as peer rejection and bullying. These challenges often undermine the effectiveness of inclusive initiatives. The authors emphasize that successful inclusion requires collaboration among educators, administrators, families, and policymakers. Inclusive education cannot be achieved solely through policy directives; it requires systemic commitment and coordinated implementation.

This study is relevant because it highlights the importance of institutional readiness and stakeholder engagement in promoting inclusion. It reinforces the need for comprehensive support systems within educational institutions.

9. Institutional Recognition of Gender Diversity

A report published by the Times of India (2016) documented Kerala University's introduction of a third gender category in university application forms. This initiative represented a significant step toward recognizing gender diversity within higher education administration.

The report highlights the symbolic importance of institutional recognition. By formally acknowledging transgender identities, educational institutions can contribute to greater visibility and social acceptance. However, the report also suggests that administrative recognition alone is insufficient. Structural barriers, cultural stigma, and limited support mechanisms continue to affect transgender students' experiences. Consequently, inclusion must extend beyond symbolic measures to encompass substantive institutional transformation.

This example illustrates the distinction between formal recognition and meaningful inclusion, a theme that is central to the present study.

10. Bullying, Stigma, and Psychosocial Barriers

Mathews (2022) examines bullying victimization among adolescents in Kerala, emphasizing the influence of family dynamics, peer relationships, and institutional responses. The study highlights bullying as a significant psychosocial barrier affecting educational participation and well-being.

The findings suggest that inadequate teacher training and weak institutional interventions often allow bullying to persist. Victims frequently experience anxiety, reduced self-esteem, social withdrawal, and academic difficulties.

Similarly, Majumdar (2023) explores colourism as a form of social discrimination. The study demonstrates how appearance-based prejudice influences identity formation, social interactions, and opportunities for participation.

Together, these studies underscore the importance of addressing psychosocial dimensions of inclusion. Educational environments cannot be considered inclusive if students continue to experience stigma, discrimination, and exclusion. Their findings support the present study's focus on socio-cultural barriers and lived experiences within higher education institutions.

2.3 RESEARCH GAP

Neglect of Psychosocial Dimensions

Although previous studies have acknowledged psychosocial issues such as bullying, stigma, discrimination, and mental health concerns among students, these factors have often been examined as isolated psychological or behavioral issues rather than as consequences of institutional exclusion. For instance, Mathews (2022) highlights the adverse effects of bullying on students' emotional well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance. However, limited attention has been given to understanding how institutional culture, discriminatory practices, lack of inclusive policies, and inadequate support systems contribute to these psychosocial challenges within higher education. Existing literature rarely explores the relationship between psychosocial well-being, students' sense of belonging, academic engagement, and learning outcomes. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in understanding how institutional environments either reinforce or reduce psychosocial barriers experienced by marginalized students. The present study addresses this gap by examining psychosocial experiences as an integral component of inclusive education and by exploring how institutional practices influence students' emotional well-being, participation, and overall educational experiences.

Inadequate Focus on Marginalized Groups in Higher Education

The existing literature demonstrates that research on inclusive education in higher education has predominantly focused on broad policy issues or specific categories such as disability or gender. Although studies by Mittal and Goel (2024) and Afsina and Joseph (2024) provide valuable insights into the experiences of transgender students and differently abled learners, research remains fragmented and limited in scope. There is comparatively little empirical evidence examining the lived experiences of students from multiple marginalized backgrounds, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, economically weaker sections, first-generation learners, linguistic minorities, religious minorities, LGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities within higher education institutions, particularly in Kerala. Furthermore, most existing studies investigate these groups independently, with limited consideration of how multiple identities intersect to influence educational experiences. This lack of an intersectional perspective restricts understanding of the complex and overlapping forms of exclusion that students encounter. Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by adopting an intersectional approach that examines how diverse social identities collectively shape students' experiences of inclusion, participation, engagement, belonging, and learning outcomes within colleges in Thiruvananthapuram.

Technology and Inclusion Gap

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the role of assistive technologies, digital learning platforms, and online educational resources in promoting inclusive education. For example, Yenduri et al. (2023) demonstrate that assistive technologies can significantly improve accessibility, learner autonomy, and academic participation among students with

disabilities and learning difficulties. However, existing research primarily discusses the potential benefits of technology and provides limited evidence regarding its actual implementation within higher education institutions. There is insufficient research examining whether colleges possess adequate digital infrastructure, assistive devices, accessible learning management systems, and trained personnel to effectively support diverse learners. Furthermore, issues such as the digital divide, affordability of assistive technologies, internet accessibility, digital literacy, and students' actual utilization of available technological resources remain underexplored, particularly in the context of colleges in Kerala. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed disparities in digital access and participation, highlighting the need for more comprehensive research on technological inclusion. Accordingly, the present study addresses this gap by examining how institutional practices related to accessibility, technological support, and digital inclusion influence students' participation, engagement, and educational experiences in higher education.

2.4 CONCLUSION OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The reviewed literature demonstrates that inclusive education has become a central concern within contemporary higher education discourse. Although substantial progress has been made in expanding access and developing supportive policy frameworks, significant challenges remain in achieving meaningful inclusion.

The studies collectively reveal that educational inequalities persist through structural barriers, sociocultural exclusion, pedagogical limitations, and inadequate institutional support. They also highlight the importance of addressing intersectionality, psychosocial well-being, accessibility, and inclusive pedagogy in promoting equitable educational experiences.

A recurring theme across the literature is the gap between policy aspirations and institutional realities. While educational policies increasingly emphasize inclusion, their implementation often remains inconsistent and fragmented. Consequently, many students continue to face barriers that affect participation, engagement, and achievement.

The present study builds upon these insights by examining policy–practice gaps in inclusive higher education within colleges of Thiruvananthapuram. Through an intersectional and context-sensitive approach, it seeks to contribute empirical evidence regarding institutional practices, socio-cultural challenges, student engagement, and learning outcomes. In doing so, the study aims to strengthen understanding of inclusive higher education and support the development of more equitable and responsive educational institute

2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework integrating theories of equity, social justice, and inclusive pedagogy to examine inclusion in higher education;

The Theory of Equity in Education (McCowan, 2016) provides the foundational lens, emphasizing equity of access, participation, and outcomes. It explains how structural inequalities such as caste, gender, class, and disability shape unequal educational trajectories, reinforcing exclusion despite policy expansion. The framework is further informed by the Social Model of Disability, which conceptualizes disability not as an individual deficit but as a result of institutional and environmental barriers. This aligns with findings on the importance of assistive technologies and inclusive infrastructure in enhancing participation (Yenduri et al., 2023).

The study also draws on Inclusive Education Theory, which advocates for the integration of all learners within mainstream education through flexible, learner-centered approaches (Kumari et al., 2024). This includes the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), supporting diverse learning needs through adaptive teaching strategies.

From a critical perspective, Social Exclusion Theory explains how systemic factors economic constraints, privatization, and socio-cultural discrimination contribute to marginalization in education (Narayana et al., 2009). This is complemented by Intersectionality Theory, which highlights how overlapping identities (gender, caste, disability, sexuality) intensify exclusionary experiences, particularly for marginalized groups such as transgender students (Mittal & Goel, 2024).

Additionally, Constructivist Learning Theory supports the role of innovative teaching strategies in fostering active engagement, critical thinking, and improved learning outcomes (Lakshmi, 2024). This emphasizes the need for participatory and student-centered pedagogies.

Finally, psychosocial dimensions are incorporated through Ecological Systems Theory, which recognizes the influence of family, institutional, and societal contexts on student experiences, including issues like bullying, stigma, and cultural biases (Mathews, 2022; Majumdar, 2023).

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework to analyze how institutional practices, socio-cultural dynamics, and pedagogical approaches interact to shape inclusion, engagement, and learning outcomes in higher education.

2.5 RESEARCH GAP ANALYSIS

Neglect of Psychosocial Dimensions

Although previous studies have acknowledged psychosocial issues such as bullying, stigma, discrimination, and mental health concerns among students, these factors have often been examined as isolated psychological or behavioral issues rather than as consequences of institutional exclusion. For instance, Mathews (2022) highlights the adverse effects of bullying on students' emotional well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance. However, limited attention has been given to understanding how institutional culture, discriminatory practices, lack of inclusive policies, and inadequate support systems contribute to these psychosocial challenges within higher education. Existing literature rarely explores the relationship between psychosocial well-being, students' sense of belonging, academic engagement, and learning outcomes. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in understanding how institutional environments either reinforce or reduce psychosocial barriers experienced by marginalized students. The present study addresses this gap by examining psychosocial experiences as an integral component of inclusive education and by exploring how institutional practices influence students' emotional well-being, participation, and overall educational experiences.

Inadequate Focus on Marginalized Groups in Higher Education

The existing literature demonstrates that research on inclusive education in higher education has predominantly focused on broad policy issues or specific categories such as disability or gender. Although studies by Mittal and Goel (2024) and Afsina and Joseph (2024) provide valuable insights into the experiences of transgender students and differently abled learners, research remains fragmented and limited in scope. There is comparatively little empirical evidence examining the lived experiences of students from multiple marginalized backgrounds, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, economically weaker sections, first-generation learners, linguistic minorities, religious minorities, LGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities within higher education institutions, particularly in Kerala. Furthermore, most existing studies investigate these groups independently, with limited consideration of how multiple identities intersect to influence educational experiences. This lack of an intersectional perspective restricts understanding of the complex and overlapping forms of exclusion that students encounter. Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by adopting an intersectional approach that examines how diverse social identities collectively shape students' experiences of inclusion, participation, engagement, belonging, and learning outcomes within colleges in Thiruvananthapuram.

Technology and Inclusion Gap

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the role of assistive technologies, digital learning platforms, and online educational resources in promoting inclusive education. For example, Yenduri et al. (2023) demonstrate that assistive technologies can significantly improve accessibility, learner autonomy, and academic participation among students with disabilities and learning difficulties. However, existing research primarily discusses the potential benefits of technology and provides limited evidence regarding its actual implementation within higher education institutions. There is insufficient research examining whether colleges possess adequate digital infrastructure, assistive devices, accessible learning management systems, and trained personnel to effectively support diverse learners. Furthermore, issues such as the digital divide, affordability of assistive technologies, internet accessibility, digital literacy, and students' actual utilization of available technological resources remain underexplored, particularly in the context of colleges in Kerala. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed disparities in digital access and participation, highlighting the need for more comprehensive research on technological inclusion. Accordingly, the present study addresses this gap by examining how institutional practices related to accessibility, technological support, and digital inclusion influence students' participation, engagement, and educational experiences in higher education.

Table 2.1 Summary of Reviewed Literature

Literature Title	Author(s)	Year	Source	Summary of Literature Review
<i>Three Dimensions of Equity of Access to Higher Education</i>	Tristan McCowan	2016	<i>Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education</i>	The study conceptualizes equity in higher education through availability, accessibility, and horizontality. It argues that access alone is insufficient, as socio-economic inequalities continue to influence participation and educational outcomes. The study highlights the need for institutions to address structural barriers to achieve

				genuine educational equity.
<i>Inclusive Education in India: A Systematic Review of Policies and Practices</i>	Kumari, Bika, & Bhesera	2024	Journal Article	The review examines the evolution of inclusive education in India and identifies gaps between policy intentions and implementation. It emphasizes the need for flexible pedagogy, institutional preparedness, teacher training, and inclusive learning environments to accommodate diverse learners.
<i>Innovative Teaching Strategies and Student Engagement in Higher Education</i>	Lakshmi	2024	Journal Article	The study explores how learner-centered teaching strategies influence student engagement and academic performance. It concludes that collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and flexible instructional methods improve participation and learning outcomes but require institutional support and faculty training.
<i>Inclusive Education from the Perspectives of Parents and Teachers of Differently Abled Students</i>	Afsina & Joseph	2024	Journal Article	This study investigates challenges faced in implementing inclusive education from stakeholder perspectives. Major issues identified include inadequate

				infrastructure, limited teacher preparedness, curriculum adaptation difficulties, and insufficient institutional support.
<i>Inclusion of Transgender Students in Indian Higher Education under the National Education Policy 2020</i>	Mittal & Goel	2024	Journal Article	The study examines institutional inclusion of transgender students following the National Education Policy 2020. Despite progressive policies, transgender students continue to experience discrimination, inadequate institutional support, and barriers to equal participation.
<i>Assistive Technologies for Learners with Specific Learning Difficulties</i>	Yenduri et al.	2023	Journal Article	The authors discuss the role of assistive technologies, adaptive software, and digital learning tools in enhancing accessibility for students with learning difficulties. The study highlights the potential of technology to improve learning outcomes while noting challenges such as affordability and limited institutional implementation.
<i>Bullying Victimization among Adolescents in Kerala</i>	Mathews	2022	Journal Article	The study examines bullying as a psychosocial barrier affecting adolescents' emotional well-being

				and academic participation. It emphasizes the role of schools, teachers, and parents in creating supportive environments and preventing exclusionary practices.
<i>Colourism and Social Exclusion: Understanding Appearance-Based Discrimination</i>	Majumdar	2023	Journal Article	The research explores colourism as a form of social discrimination that influences identity formation, self-esteem, and social interactions. It demonstrates how appearance-based prejudice contributes to exclusion within educational and social settings.
<i>Kerala's Education System: From Inclusion to Exclusion</i>	Narayana & George	2009	Centre for Socio-economic and Environmental Studies (CSES)	The report critically analyses changes in Kerala's education system, highlighting the effects of privatization, increasing educational costs, and institutional inequalities on access to higher education. It argues that educational reforms have unintentionally contributed to exclusion among disadvantaged groups.
<i>Developing Inclusive Education Systems: What</i>	Mel Ainscow	2005	<i>Journal of Educational Change</i>	The study proposes that inclusive education requires systemic reforms involving policy, leadership,

<i>Are the Levers for Change?</i>				institutional culture, and collaboration among stakeholders. It emphasizes removing barriers to participation rather than focusing solely on learners' deficits.
<i>Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools</i>	Tony Booth & Mel Ainscow	2011	Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education	The framework provides practical guidelines for developing inclusive institutional cultures, policies, and practices. It advocates participation, collaboration, and continuous institutional improvement to promote inclusion.
<i>Promoting Inclusion and Equity in Education: Lessons from International Experiences</i>	Mel Ainscow	2020	<i>Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy</i>	The paper examines international experiences of inclusive education and emphasizes that educational equity requires institutional reform, collaborative leadership, and sustained policy implementation.
<i>What Counts as Evidence of Inclusive Education?</i>	Lani Florian	2014	<i>European Journal of Special Needs Education</i>	The study argues that inclusive education should be evaluated through students' participation, engagement, and learning experiences rather than placement or enrollment statistics alone.
<i>Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy</i>	Lani Florian & Black-Hawkins	2011	<i>British Educational</i>	The article introduces inclusive pedagogy as an approach that recognizes

			<i>Research Journal</i>	learner diversity and adapts teaching practices to support participation and achievement for all students.
<i>The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education</i>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	1994	International Policy Document	The Salamanca Statement established inclusive education as an international educational priority, advocating that regular educational institutions should accommodate all learners regardless of individual differences.
<i>Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All</i>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	2020	Global Education Monitoring Report	The report emphasizes that inclusive education extends beyond access to participation, equity, achievement, and well-being. It identifies policy implementation gaps and recommends systemic reforms to reduce educational inequalities.
<i>Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education</i>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	2021	Global Report	The report advocates transforming education systems to become more equitable, inclusive, and responsive to diverse learner needs while emphasizing collaboration, sustainability, and social justice.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 TITLE OF THE STUDY

“Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Higher Education: Perspectives from Colleges in Thiruvananthapuram.”

This study is situated within the broader discourse of inclusive education and critically examines the disjunction between policy intent and institutional practice. It adopts an intersectional lens to understand how multiple axes of identity shape educational experiences within higher education institutions.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

General Research Question

- ❖ How do students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds experience inclusion and exclusion within higher education institutions, and how are inclusive education practices reflected in their academic and social experiences?

Specific Research Question

1. What experiences of inclusion and exclusion do students encounter in higher education institutions?
2. How do students perceive the inclusiveness of institutional practices and support systems?
3. How do students' social and cultural backgrounds influence their educational experiences?
4. What barriers and facilitators affect students' academic and social participation?
5. How do students describe their sense of belonging within the college environment?

3.3 THEORETICAL PROPOSITION

The study is guided by the following theoretical propositions:

- Higher levels of inclusive institutional practices are positively associated with increased student engagement and improved learning outcomes.
- Socio-cultural exclusion negatively affects students' academic performance, participation, and psychosocial well-being.
- Intersectionality intensifies exclusion, where overlapping identities such as caste, gender, disability, and socio-economic status produce compounded disadvantages.

These propositions draw from key theoretical frameworks including the Social Model of Disability, Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which collectively emphasize structural transformation rather than individual adaptation.

3.4 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

Table 3.1 Definition of Key Concepts

CONCEPT	THEORETICAL DEFINITION	OPERATIONAL DEFINITION
<i>Inclusive Education</i>	Inclusive education refers to an educational philosophy and practice that ensures equal access, participation, and learning opportunities for all learners regardless of differences in ability, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, language, religion, or identity. It emphasizes removing barriers and creating supportive learning environments (UNESCO, 2020).	In this study, inclusive education refers to the policies, institutional practices, support systems, pedagogical approaches, and accessibility measures adopted by colleges in Thiruvananthapuram to facilitate equitable participation, engagement, and learning among students from diverse backgrounds.

<i>Socio-Cultural Exclusion</i>	Socio-cultural exclusion is the process through which individuals or groups are denied full participation in social, cultural, educational, or economic life due to factors such as caste, class, gender, disability, religion, language, or sexuality (Silver, 1994).	In this study, socio-cultural exclusion refers to students' experiences of discrimination, stigma, stereotyping, marginalization, lack of representation, bullying, or reduced participation within college environments due to their social identities and backgrounds.
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<i>Student Engagement</i>	Student engagement is a multidimensional construct involving behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in educational activities that contributes to learning and academic success (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).	In this study, student engagement refers to the extent of students' participation in classroom activities, interaction with peers and faculty, sense of belonging, motivation, and involvement in academic and co-curricular activities within higher education institutions.
<i>Learning Outcomes</i>	Learning outcomes are the knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and intellectual abilities acquired by students as a result of educational experiences (Biggs & Tang, 2011).	In this study, learning outcomes refer to students' perceived academic performance, knowledge acquisition, skill development, critical thinking abilities, participation in learning activities, and overall educational achievement influenced by inclusive institutional practices.
<i>Marginalized Groups</i>	Marginalized groups are populations that experience social, economic, political, or cultural disadvantages due to systemic inequalities and exclusionary structures within society (Young, 1990).	In this study, marginalized groups include students belonging to SC/ST communities, OBC categories, economically weaker sections, persons with disabilities, first-generation learners, LGBTQIA+ individuals, religious minorities, and other students who experience barriers to equitable participation in higher education.

<i>Policy–Practice Gap</i>	A policy–practice gap refers to the discrepancy between formally stated policies and their actual implementation in practice (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973).	In this study, policy–practice gap refers to the difference between inclusive education policies, institutional commitments, and the actual experiences of students and teachers regarding accessibility, participation, support services, and inclusion within colleges.
<i>Institutional Practices</i>	Institutional practices are the formal and informal procedures, policies, norms, and actions adopted by organizations that influence individual experiences and outcomes. (Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, 1983)	In this study, institutional practices refer to the accessibility measures, support services, teaching methods, administrative procedures, grievance mechanisms, and inclusion-related initiatives implemented within colleges.
<i>Accessibility</i>	Accessibility refers to the extent to which environments, services, information, and opportunities can be used equally by all individuals, including persons with disabilities (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006).	In this study, accessibility refers to the availability of ramps, lifts, assistive technologies, accessible classrooms, learning materials, and institutional accommodations that enable students to participate fully in academic and campus life.
<i>Intersectionality</i>	Intersectionality is a theoretical framework developed by Crenshaw (1989) that explains how multiple social identities interact to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression.	In this study, intersectionality refers to the overlapping influence of caste, class, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, and socio-economic status on students' experiences of inclusion, exclusion, engagement, and learning outcomes in higher education.

3.5 PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted to assess the feasibility, reliability, and validity of the research instruments. The pilot involved a small sample of six students from selected colleges in Thiruvananthapuram.

Purpose of the Pilot Study:

- To test the clarity and comprehensibility of interview questions.
- To identify ambiguities or biases in the research tool.
- To assess the appropriateness of language and sequencing of questions.
- To estimate the time required for data collection.

Outcomes of the Pilot Study:

- Minor modifications were made in question phrasing to enhance clarity.
- Additional probes were included to capture deeper insights into socio-cultural experiences.
- Redundant questions were removed to improve efficiency.

The pilot study ensured that the final instrument was contextually relevant and methodologically sound.

3.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for studying social phenomena such as inclusion, exclusion, and institutional practices.

Rationale for Qualitative Design:

- It allows for in-depth learning of experiences.
- It captures subjective meanings, perceptions, and interpretations.
- It facilitates understanding of context-specific dynamics within institutions.

Multiple case study method is used to focus on understanding patterns, themes, and relationships rather than establishing causal generalizations.

Case Study Approach:

The study incorporates a case-based approach involving six respondents (three students and three teachers). This enables a comparative analysis of perspectives across different roles and identities within the educational system.

3.7 DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

Research Site:

The study was conducted in five colleges located in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. These institutions represent diverse academic environments, including urban and rural settings, and vary in terms of infrastructure, student demographics, and institutional resources.

Participants:

A total of six participants were selected:

- Students (3): Representing diverse backgrounds in terms of caste, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status.
- Teachers (3): Representing different disciplines, institutional contexts, and years of experience.

Participant Profile Overview:

- Inclusion of marginalized identities (disability, LGBTQIA+, first-generation learners).
- Representation of both urban and rural institutional contexts.
- Variation in academic disciplines (Sociology, Social Work, Political Science).

This diversity enabled a comprehensive understanding of inclusive practices from multiple perspectives.

3.8 SAMPLING STRATEGY AND SELECTION CRITERIA

Sampling Technique:

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to inclusive education.

Justification:

- Enables selection of information-rich cases.
- Ensures representation of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.
- Facilitates in-depth qualitative analysis.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Students currently enrolled in selected colleges.
- Teachers actively engaged in teaching.
- Participants willing to provide informed consent.
- Individuals with exposure to inclusive or exclusionary experiences

Selection Criteria:

- Diversity in socio-cultural backgrounds (caste, gender, class).
- Inclusion of marginalized identities.
- Representation across academic levels (undergraduate and postgraduate).
- Teachers with varied years of experience.

3.9 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Primary Data Collection:

Data were collected using a structured interview method with a pre-designed interview schedule.

Features of the Interview Schedule:

- Questions related to inclusive practices and institutional policies.
- Items addressing socio-cultural barriers and discrimination.
- Questions on student engagement and academic participation.
- Probes on learning outcomes and coping strategies.

Advantages of the Method:

- Ensures uniformity across respondents.
- Allows for in-depth qualitative insights.
- Facilitates comparative analysis.

Secondary Data Collection:

Secondary data were collected from:

- Academic journals and research articles.
- Policy documents (NEP 2020, UGC guidelines).
- Institutional reports and publications.

These sources provided theoretical and contextual support for the study.

3.10 PRE-TEST OF THE TOOL

The interview schedule was pre-tested to ensure methodological rigor.

Objectives of Pre-Test:

- To evaluate clarity and relevance of questions.
- To identify potential biases or leading questions.
- To assess respondent understanding.

Modifications Made:

- Simplification of complex terminology.
- Reordering of questions for logical flow.
- Inclusion of probing questions for depth.

The pre-test enhanced both reliability (consistency) and validity (accuracy) of the instrument.

3.11 DATA ANALYSIS

The present study adopted a qualitative research design utilizing a multiple case study approach to explore the policy–practice gaps in inclusive higher education and their influence on student engagement and learning outcomes. Given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on understanding lived experiences, perceptions, and institutional realities, qualitative data analysis was considered most appropriate. The study sought to capture the complexity of inclusion and exclusion within higher education institutions by examining the narratives of both students and teachers representing diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

Qualitative analysis was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural contexts. Unlike quantitative approaches that focus on

measurement and statistical relationships, qualitative analysis emphasizes meaning, interpretation, and the subjective experiences of participants. Since the study aimed to examine how inclusive education policies are interpreted, implemented, and experienced within colleges, a qualitative analytical framework provided the flexibility necessary to capture nuanced experiences and contextual realities. Furthermore, the multiple case study method allowed the researcher to compare and contrast experiences across different participants, thereby generating a richer and more comprehensive understanding of inclusive practices within higher education institutions.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative analytical method that facilitates the systematic identification, organization, interpretation, and reporting of patterns within textual data. Thematic analysis was particularly suitable for this study because it allowed the researcher to move beyond individual narratives and identify broader themes related to institutional practices, accessibility, socio-cultural exclusion, student engagement, and learning outcomes. The method also enabled the integration of theoretical concepts with empirical findings, thereby strengthening the analytical depth of the study.

The process of data analysis was carried out through several interrelated stages. These stages were designed to ensure rigor, transparency, credibility, and analytical coherence throughout the research process. Each stage contributed to the gradual transformation of raw interview data into meaningful themes and interpretations that addressed the study objectives and research questions.

Data Familiarization

The first stage of analysis involved familiarization with the data. Following data collection, all interview responses were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and richness of participants' narratives. Transcription constituted a crucial analytical step because it enabled the researcher to engage closely with the data and begin identifying preliminary insights. The transcripts were read repeatedly and carefully reviewed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

This process of immersion allowed the researcher to become familiar with the content, tone, language, and context of each interview. Notes and analytical memos were maintained during repeated readings to document initial observations, recurring issues, emotional expressions, and significant statements. Attention was paid to descriptions of institutional practices, experiences of exclusion, perceptions of support systems, and accounts of student engagement. Through continuous engagement with the data, the researcher gained a holistic understanding of each case before proceeding to detailed coding.

Within the multiple case study framework, familiarization also involved understanding the unique context of each participant's experience. Student cases and teacher cases were initially examined individually to appreciate the specific circumstances surrounding each narrative. This approach ensured that the individuality of each case was preserved while preparing for subsequent cross-case analysis.

Case-Based Analysis

Since the study adopted a multiple case study design, an important component of the analysis involved case-based examination. Each participant was treated as a distinct case representing a unique experience of inclusive higher education. Detailed case summaries were prepared for all respondents, highlighting demographic characteristics, educational backgrounds, institutional contexts, and key experiences related to inclusion and exclusion.

For student respondents, particular attention was paid to factors such as disability status, socio-economic background, gender identity, sexuality, caste location, and educational experiences. For teacher respondents, emphasis was placed on professional experiences, perceptions of institutional practices, pedagogical approaches, and observations regarding student inclusion.

The purpose of case-based analysis was to develop a rich understanding of each participant's lived experience before identifying broader patterns across cases. This approach aligns with qualitative case study methodology, which emphasizes contextual understanding and the exploration of complex social phenomena within real-life settings.

Initial Coding

Following familiarization, the second stage involved systematic coding of the data. Coding refers to the process of assigning labels to meaningful segments of text in order to organize and interpret qualitative information. An open coding approach was adopted, allowing codes to emerge directly from participants' narratives while also being informed by relevant theoretical concepts.

The coding process involved careful examination of interview transcripts line by line. Statements, phrases, and paragraphs that reflected significant experiences, perceptions, or observations were assigned descriptive labels. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were employed. Inductive coding enabled themes to emerge naturally from the data, while deductive coding was guided by existing theoretical frameworks such as inclusive education, intersectionality, student engagement, and the Social Model of Disability.

Examples of initial codes included:

- Lack of accessibility
- Inadequate infrastructure
- Financial hardship
- Peer exclusion
- Classroom discrimination
- Institutional unawareness
- Absence of accommodations
- Flexible teaching practices
- Body doubling support
- Lack of faculty training
- Curriculum rigidity
- Identity concealment
- Emotional disengagement
- Positive peer support
- Sense of belonging
- Administrative barriers
- Policy awareness
- Teacher empathy
- Social stigma
- Limited representation

The coding process generated a substantial number of initial codes representing diverse dimensions of participants' experiences. These codes served as the building blocks for subsequent analytical stages.

Categorization of Codes

The third stage involved organizing related codes into broader conceptual categories. While coding generated numerous descriptive labels, categorization helped reduce fragmentation and create analytical coherence. Similar codes were grouped together based on conceptual relationships and thematic relevance.

The categorization process facilitated the identification of recurring issues across different cases. It enabled the researcher to move from descriptive observations toward more interpretive analysis by examining how individual experiences related to broader domains of inclusion and exclusion.

Several key categories emerged during this stage:

Institutional Practices and Policy Implementation

This category included codes related to policy awareness, institutional commitment, administrative procedures, implementation gaps, and organizational responses to inclusion.

Accessibility and Infrastructure

This category captured experiences related to physical accessibility, assistive technologies, classroom design, mobility barriers, and institutional accommodations.

Socio-Cultural Exclusion and Marginalization

Codes relating to discrimination, stigma, stereotyping, identity-based exclusion, peer relationships, and social isolation were grouped within this category.

Pedagogical Processes and Academic Flexibility

This category encompassed teaching methods, curriculum design, assessment practices, classroom participation, academic accommodations, and learning support.

Student Engagement

Codes reflecting behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement were grouped together. These included participation, motivation, belongingness, confidence, and academic involvement.

Institutional Support Systems

This category included counseling services, scholarships, mentoring programmes, awareness initiatives, grievance mechanisms, and support networks.

The categorization process helped organize complex qualitative data into manageable analytical units while preserving connections between individual experiences and broader institutional contexts.

Theme Development

The fourth stage involved synthesizing categories into overarching themes and sub-themes. Themes represent patterns of meaning that capture important aspects of the data in relation to the research objectives and questions. Theme development required interpretive analysis, moving beyond description to identify underlying patterns and relationships.

Several major themes emerged from the analysis:

Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Education

This theme captured discrepancies between formal institutional commitments to inclusion and participants' actual experiences. Respondents frequently reported that inclusive policies existed at the institutional level but were inconsistently implemented in practice.

Structural and Infrastructural Barriers

This theme highlighted the role of inaccessible environments, inadequate facilities, and limited institutional resources in restricting participation and engagement.

Pedagogical Rigidities and Academic Challenges

Participants described traditional teaching methods, inflexible assessment systems, and limited accommodations as barriers to learning and participation.

Intersectional Marginalization

This theme reflected how multiple social identities such as caste, disability, sexuality, class, and gender interacted to shape experiences of exclusion and disadvantage.

Limited Institutional Support and Awareness

Respondents frequently identified gaps in institutional awareness, faculty preparedness, and support services related to inclusive education.

Resilience, Coping Strategies, and Informal Support

Despite institutional barriers, participants demonstrated resilience through personal coping mechanisms, peer support, self-advocacy, and adaptive strategies.

Each theme was further divided into sub-themes to capture the complexity and diversity of participant experiences. Verbatim quotations were incorporated throughout the analysis to maintain authenticity and ensure that participants' voices remained central to the interpretation.

Interpretation and Analytical Integration

The fifth stage involved interpreting the identified themes within broader theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Interpretation moved beyond description to examine the significance and implications of the findings.

The Social Model of Disability provided a lens for understanding how institutional barriers contribute to exclusion. Rather than locating difficulties within individual students, the analysis highlighted how inaccessible environments and inadequate accommodations create obstacles to participation.

Intersectionality Theory was used to examine how overlapping identities influence educational experiences. The findings revealed that students often experienced multiple forms of marginalization simultaneously, resulting in unique patterns of exclusion and disadvantage.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) informed the interpretation of pedagogical practices. The analysis demonstrated how rigid teaching methods and assessment structures limited participation among diverse learners, while flexible approaches enhanced engagement and inclusion.

Student Engagement Theory guided the examination of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of participation. The findings suggested that inclusive practices significantly influence students' sense of belonging, motivation, and academic involvement.

Through theoretical integration, the study was able to connect individual experiences with broader social, institutional, and educational processes.

Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

An important feature of the multiple case study approach was cross-case analysis. After individual cases were examined, comparisons were conducted across student and teacher cases to identify similarities, differences, and patterns.

The comparative analysis revealed several convergences. Both students and teachers acknowledged the existence of policy–practice gaps, infrastructural limitations, and inadequate institutional support systems. Participants also recognized the importance of inclusive pedagogy and greater institutional awareness.

At the same time, notable divergences emerged. Students tended to emphasize lived experiences of exclusion and barriers to participation, whereas teachers focused more on institutional constraints and implementation challenges. Students highlighted emotional and psychosocial dimensions of exclusion, while teachers often discussed structural and administrative limitations.

Cross-case analysis enhanced the robustness of the findings by identifying recurring patterns across different contexts and participant groups. It also contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive higher education practices.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance the quality and credibility of the analysis, several strategies were employed. Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, repeated readings of transcripts, and the use of verbatim quotations. These measures ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' actual experiences.

Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of analytical procedures. Coding decisions, category development, and theme generation were recorded to provide an audit trail of the research process.

Confirmability was enhanced by maintaining analytical memos and reflexive notes throughout the study. These records helped minimize researcher bias and ensured that findings emerged from the data rather than preconceived assumptions.

Transferability was supported through rich and detailed descriptions of participants, institutional contexts, and analytical processes. Such descriptions enable readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other settings.

Data triangulation was also employed by integrating primary interview data with secondary sources such as policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly literature. Triangulation strengthened the credibility of findings by corroborating evidence across multiple sources.

Overall, the thematic analysis provided a rigorous and systematic framework for examining the complex realities of inclusive higher education. Through multiple stages of familiarization, coding, categorization, theme development, interpretation, and cross-case comparison, the analysis generated meaningful insights into institutional practices, socio-cultural exclusion, student engagement, and learning outcomes.

The use of a qualitative multiple case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of diverse experiences while also facilitating identification of broader patterns across cases. The analysis revealed significant policy–practice gaps, structural barriers, pedagogical challenges, and intersectional forms of marginalization. At the same time, it highlighted the resilience of students and the potential of inclusive institutional practices to enhance engagement and educational outcomes. Consequently, the analytical process contributed substantially to achieving the study's objectives and advancing understanding of inclusion within higher education institutions.

3.12 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants. Ethical considerations were integrated at every stage of the research process.

Informed Consent

Prior to data collection, all participants were provided with clear and comprehensive information about the purpose, objectives, and procedures of the study. Consent was obtained voluntarily, ensuring that participants were fully aware of their involvement and its implications.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Strict measures were taken to protect the identity of respondents. Personal identifiers such as names, institutional affiliations, and specific details were either anonymized or replaced with pseudonyms (e.g., Student A, Teacher D). Data were stored securely and accessed only for research purposes.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Respondents were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences or obligation to provide justification.

Non-Maleficence and Psychological Safety

Given the sensitive nature of topics such as exclusion, discrimination, disability, and identity, care was taken to ensure that participants did not experience discomfort or distress. Questions were framed respectfully, and participants were allowed to skip any question they were not comfortable answering.

Ethical Use of Data

All data collected were used strictly for academic and research purposes. The information was not shared with third parties, and findings were presented in a manner that prevents identification of individuals or institutions.

Sensitivity to Intersectional Identities

Special attention was given to issues related to caste, gender, sexuality, disability, and socio-economic status. The research approach was non-judgmental and culturally sensitive, ensuring that participants' lived experiences were respected and represented with accuracy and dignity.

Integrity and Transparency

The research process maintained transparency in data collection, analysis, and reporting. Findings were presented honestly without manipulation or misrepresentation.

3.13 Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Assumptions

The study is based on the following underlying assumptions:

- Participants provided honest, reflective, and accurate responses based on their lived experiences.
- The selected colleges, though limited in number, reflect broader institutional patterns and trends in higher education within Thiruvananthapuram.
- Respondents possess sufficient awareness and understanding of inclusive practices to meaningfully contribute to the study.
- Institutional practices discussed by participants are representative of their actual experiences rather than isolated incidents.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

1. Small Sample Size

The study is based on a limited number of respondents (six participants), which restricts the generalizability of findings. The results are indicative rather than representative of the entire higher education system.

2. Geographical Restriction

The research is confined to selected colleges in Thiruvananthapuram. Therefore, findings may not fully capture variations across other districts or regions.

3. Methodological Constraints

The use of structured interviews, while ensuring consistency, may limit the depth and spontaneity of responses compared to unstructured or in-depth interviews.

4. Subjectivity of Responses

Data are based on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by personal perceptions, memory biases, or social desirability.

5. Limited Institutional Representation

The study includes a small number of institutions, which may not reflect the diversity of institutional types (e.g., private vs. public, autonomous vs. affiliated).

6. Time Constraints

The scope and duration of the study may have limited the extent of data collection and analysis.

Scope of the Study

Despite its limitations, the study has a clearly defined scope and contributes meaningfully to the field of inclusive education:

1. Focus on Higher Education

The study specifically examines inclusive practices within colleges, rather than school-level education, thereby addressing a relatively underexplored area.

2. Intersectional Perspective

It adopts an intersectional approach, analyzing how multiple identities (caste, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, sexuality) interact to shape student experiences.

3. Dual Perspective Analysis

By including both student and teacher respondents, the study captures multiple dimensions of inclusion, including policy implementation and lived experience.

4. Context-Specific Insights

The research provides localized insights into the functioning of higher education institutions in Thiruvananthapuram, making it relevant for regional policy and practice.

5. Focus on Engagement and Outcomes

The study goes beyond access to examine student engagement and learning outcomes, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion.

6. Applicability for Policy and Practice

Findings can inform institutional reforms, faculty training, and policy development aimed at strengthening inclusive education.

CHAPTER 4: CASE DESCRIPTION/ NARRATIVES

Student Cases

Student A – Student A is a 21-year-old female undergraduate student (BA Sociology) from an urban college in Thiruvananthapuram. She belongs to an OBC community and comes from a financially disadvantaged background. She has a locomotor disability and is currently in her final year of study.

Student B – Student B is a 23-year-old male postgraduate student (MA Social Work) with ADHD from an urban college. He belongs to an OBC community and comes from a low-income household. He is a first-generation learner and is in the second year of his programme

Student C – Student C is a 22-year-old undergraduate student (BA Political Science) from an urban college. The student identifies with a queer sexuality and comes from a socio-culturally marginalized background. She is in the third year of study.

Teacher Cases

Teacher D – Teacher D is a 45-year-old female assistant professor teaching Sociology in an urban college. She belongs to a general category and has 18 years of teaching experience.

Teacher E – Teacher E is a 39-year-old male assistant professor teaching Social Work in a rural college. He belongs to an OBC community and has 12 years of teaching experience.

Teacher F – Teacher F is a 50-year-old female associate professor teaching Political Science in an urban college. She belongs to an SC community and has 22 years of teaching experience.

Case Presentation:

RESPONDENT ONE – STUDENT A

Case Introduction

Student A is a 21-year-old female undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology in an urban college in Thiruvananthapuram. She belongs to an Other Backward Class (OBC) community and comes from a financially disadvantaged household. Student A has a locomotor disability and is currently in her final year of study. Her educational journey reflects the intersection of disability, socio-economic disadvantage, and caste-based marginalization. Despite the existence of inclusive education policies, her experiences reveal multiple barriers affecting accessibility, participation, and engagement within higher education.

Accessibility and Infrastructure

When asked about accessibility within the college campus, Student A described several difficulties associated with mobility and physical access.

“The college has tried to make some changes..... there are ramps in a few places..... but accessibility is still not consistent throughout the campus. Sometimes my classes are in different buildings and moving from one place to another becomes very difficult. There are days when I reach the classroom already tired because I have spent so much energy just trying to get there. Some buildings don't have lifts..... and in certain places the ramps are too steep or not maintained properly. People often assume that once a ramp is built, accessibility is solved..... but for students like me, accessibility means being able to move independently and participate without constantly depending on someone else's help.”

Discussion

Student A's response demonstrates that physical accessibility remains partial rather than comprehensive. Although infrastructural accommodations exist, they are inconsistently implemented across campus spaces. Her experiences reflect the Social Model of Disability, which argues that disability-related barriers are often produced by inaccessible environments rather than individual impairments. The findings suggest that institutional efforts toward inclusion remain fragmented, creating barriers to independent participation.

Academic Participation and Learning Experience

Student A discussed challenges associated with classroom participation and academic accommodations.

“Most teachers are kind and understanding..... but support depends on the individual teacher. There isn't a system where accommodations are automatically provided. Sometimes I need specific seating arrangements or additional consideration when moving between classes..... but I usually have to explain my situation repeatedly. It can be exhausting. There are days when I hesitate to ask for help because I don't want to feel like a burden. Inclusive policies may exist..... but from a student's perspective, support often feels informal and uncertain rather than guaranteed.”

Discussion

The narrative highlights a policy–practice gap in disability inclusion. While institutional policies may recognize the need for accommodations, implementation appears dependent on individual faculty members rather than standardized procedures. This inconsistency can negatively influence academic participation and emotional engagement.

Financial Challenges

Student A identified economic hardship as a major factor influencing her educational experience.

“Coming from a financially struggling family makes everything more complicated..... transportation costs, study materials, project expenses..... all of these things add up. Scholarships are available, but the process can be very slow. Sometimes we wait for months without knowing when the amount will be credited. There have been situations where I had to borrow money from friends to meet academic expenses. People often think disability is my biggest challenge..... but honestly, financial stress affects me every day. When you are constantly worried about expenses, it becomes difficult to focus completely on studies.”

Discussion

The participant's narrative demonstrates the interaction between disability and socio-economic disadvantage. Her experience reflects an intersectional form of marginalization where multiple social identities combine to influence educational participation and outcomes.

Peer Relationships and Social Inclusion

Student A reflected on her relationships with classmates and her sense of belonging.

“Some of my classmates are extremely supportive..... they help me move around campus, share notes, and include me in discussions. But there are also moments when I feel different. During group activities, people sometimes assume I won't be able to contribute equally. Nobody says it directly..... but you can feel it. There have been occasions where decisions were made without asking my opinion. Those small moments stay with you. They make you wonder whether people see you as a student first or as a person with a disability.”

Discussion

This narrative illustrates subtle forms of exclusion and stigma. While overt discrimination may be absent, assumptions about ability continue to influence peer interactions. Such experiences affect emotional engagement and sense of belonging within the institution.

Institutional Awareness and Inclusion

When discussing institutional commitment to inclusion, Student A expressed mixed views.

“There are posters, policies, and awareness programmes..... but many students don't actually know what support is available. Even when we know, approaching the administration can feel intimidating. Sometimes information is not communicated properly. Inclusion often feels like something discussed during programmes and seminars..... but not something that is fully integrated into everyday college life.

I think institutions want to be inclusive..... but there is still a long way to go.”

Discussion

The participant identifies communication gaps and limited institutional visibility of inclusion-related services. This suggests that awareness and implementation mechanisms require strengthening to ensure meaningful access to support systems.

Resilience and Future Aspirations

Despite multiple barriers, Student A expressed determination and resilience.

“There have been many situations where I felt discouraged..... but giving up was never an option. I want to complete my degree, become financially independent, and build a career where I can support myself and my family. My experiences have made me stronger. I have learned to advocate for myself because often nobody else will do it for you. I hope future students won't have to struggle with the same barriers that I face today.”

Discussion

Student A's narrative reflects resilience, self-advocacy, and determination despite structural barriers. Her experiences demonstrate that while personal resilience can facilitate persistence, institutions must not rely solely on individual coping mechanisms to achieve inclusion.

Case Summary

The case of Student A highlights significant policy–practice gaps in inclusive higher education. Although institutional efforts toward inclusion are visible, barriers related to accessibility, academic accommodations, financial hardship, social participation, and institutional awareness continue to affect her educational experience. The findings demonstrate how disability, caste, and socio-economic disadvantage intersect to influence student engagement and learning outcomes.

RESPONDENT TWO – STUDENT B

Case Introduction

Student B is a 23-year-old male postgraduate student pursuing a Master of Social Work (MSW) in an urban college in Thiruvananthapuram. He belongs to an Other Backward Class (OBC) community and comes from a low-income family. He is a first-generation learner and has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Currently in the second year of his programme, Student B's educational journey reflects the intersection of neurodiversity, socio-economic disadvantage, and limited institutional awareness regarding learning differences. His experiences provide valuable insights into how higher education institutions address or fail to address the needs of neurodivergent learners. The case highlights challenges related to concentration, academic engagement, institutional support, peer perceptions, and coping strategies within the context of inclusive higher education.

Learning Challenges and Neurodiversity

When discussing his academic experience, Student B described the difficulties associated with ADHD and its impact on his learning process. He explained that maintaining attention, organizing tasks, and completing academic work often require significantly more effort compared to his peers.

“One of the biggest difficulties I face is staying focused for long periods of time..... I can sit with all the intention to study, but after a few minutes my mind starts moving somewhere else. Sometimes I am reading the same page again and again and I realize that I have not actually understood anything. It is frustrating because people see the final result and assume I am not trying hard enough. What they don't see is the amount of effort it takes just to begin a task. There are days when I spend hours planning to study but struggle to start. Then I feel guilty for not being productive..... and that creates even more stress.”

Student B further explained that academic tasks requiring sustained concentration become particularly challenging.

“Assignments are difficult because I tend to overthink everything. I start one section..... then another idea comes into my mind..... and before I know it I have moved to something completely different. Sometimes deadlines become overwhelming because I underestimate how much time I need to complete tasks. I want to do well academically, but my brain doesn't always cooperate with my plans.”

Discussion

The participant's narrative reflects key characteristics associated with ADHD, including difficulties with attention regulation, executive functioning, task initiation, and time management. These challenges influence cognitive engagement and academic performance. The findings indicate that learning barriers are not solely individual difficulties but are shaped by institutional environments that assume uniform learning styles. The experiences described by Student B support the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocate flexible learning approaches to accommodate diverse cognitive needs.

The Importance of Body Doubling as a Learning Strategy

A recurring theme in Student B's narrative was the significance of body doubling as a coping strategy. Body doubling refers to the presence of another person while completing tasks, which helps individuals with ADHD maintain focus and accountability.

“What helps me the most is something called body doubling..... even if people don't know the term. When somebody is sitting beside me studying, I find it much easier to concentrate. We don't even need to talk. Just knowing that someone else is working helps me stay on track. If I am alone, there is a higher chance that I will get distracted or start doing something else. But when I am studying near someone who is focused, I somehow feel more motivated and grounded.”

He elaborated further on how this strategy contributes to academic productivity.

“Most of my assignments get completed when I am sitting with friends in the library or classroom. It's not because they are teaching me anything..... it is simply their presence. I wish colleges understood that support does not always mean giving special treatment. Sometimes small things like creating collaborative study spaces or recognizing different ways of learning could make a huge difference.”

Discussion

Student B's account highlights the importance of alternative learning strategies for neurodivergent students. The absence of formal recognition or institutional support for such strategies reflects a gap in neurodiversity-inclusive practices. His experience suggests that inclusive education should extend beyond physical accessibility to include cognitive and psychological dimensions of learning.

Classroom Experiences and Pedagogical Rigidities

When discussing classroom teaching, Student B described difficulties with traditional lecture-based instruction.

“Long lectures are one of the hardest things for me..... especially when there is very little interaction. In the beginning I try to pay attention, but after some time my concentration starts fading. Even when I want to listen, I lose track of what is being discussed. Then I spend the rest of the class trying to catch up mentally. By the end, I sometimes leave with only fragments of information.” He further reflected on teaching methods that he finds more engaging.

“Classes where teachers encourage discussion, group activities, presentations, or practical exercises are much easier for me. When I am actively involved, I learn better. The problem is that many classrooms still depend heavily on one-way teaching. Students

are expected to sit quietly and listen for long periods. That format doesn't work well for everyone.”

Student B also highlighted difficulties related to assessment and deadlines.

“Deadlines are the same for everybody..... but not everybody functions in the same way. There have been times when I knew exactly what I wanted to write but still could not organize my work quickly enough. When assignments are submitted late, people assume it is due to carelessness. Very few understand the actual difficulty behind it.”

Discussion

These experiences reveal limitations in traditional pedagogical approaches. The participant's preference for interactive learning reflects the importance of active engagement in promoting inclusion. The findings support literature emphasizing flexible teaching strategies and learner-centered approaches as essential components of inclusive education.

Financial Constraints and First-Generation Learner Experiences

Student B's educational journey is also shaped by economic disadvantage and his status as a first-generation learner.

“Coming from a low-income family brings a different kind of pressure. There is always this awareness that education is expensive. Every expense must be justified. Sometimes I worry about books, travel costs, internet charges, and other academic expenses. While many students can focus only on their studies, I am constantly thinking about finances in the background.”

He explained how being a first-generation learner affects his educational experience.

“Nobody in my family has gone through higher education before..... so there isn't much guidance available at home. My parents support me emotionally, but they don't always understand the academic system. Many things that other students take for granted..... internships, research work, networking..... I had to learn about them on my own. Sometimes I feel like I am figuring out everything through trial and error.”

Discussion

The narrative demonstrates how socio-economic disadvantage intersects with neurodiversity to influence educational experiences. First-generation learners often face

informational and cultural barriers in addition to financial constraints. Student B's experiences highlight the importance of institutional mentoring and support systems in promoting educational equity.

Peer Relationships, Stigma, and Social Understanding

Student B described both positive and negative experiences with peers.

“I am fortunate to have a few close friends who understand me. They know that if I am struggling with a task, it doesn't mean I am not interested. They help me stay accountable and sometimes study with me when I need support. Without them, managing academics would be much harder.”

However, he also described experiences of misunderstanding and stigma.

“Not everyone understands ADHD. Some people think it is just an excuse for being lazy or irresponsible. There have been times when classmates questioned why I needed more time for certain tasks. They assume everyone should be able to work in exactly the same way. Those comments may seem small..... but they affect how comfortable you feel asking for support.”

Discussion

The participant's experiences reveal the role of social perceptions in shaping inclusion. Stigma and misconceptions regarding neurodiversity contribute to emotional disengagement and discourage help seeking behaviors. At the same time, supportive peer relationships function as important protective factors that enhance resilience and engagement.

Institutional Awareness and Support Systems

A major concern expressed by Student B was the limited awareness of ADHD within the *institutional environment*.

“The biggest issue is that ADHD is largely invisible. If someone has a physical disability, people can see the barriers. With ADHD, people often assume everything is normal because they cannot see the struggle. There is very little awareness in colleges about what ADHD actually looks like. Even some teachers are unfamiliar with it.”

He elaborated on the need for formal support mechanisms.

“I am not asking for special treatment..... I just want recognition that different students learn differently. Things like flexible deadlines in certain situations, awareness among faculty, study support services, or guidance on learning strategies would help a lot. Right now most students have to figure everything out by themselves.”

Discussion

The findings indicate a significant policy–practice gap regarding neurodiversity inclusion. Although higher education policies emphasize diversity and inclusion, institutional mechanisms for supporting students with ADHD remain limited. The participant's experiences suggest a need for greater awareness, faculty training, and structured support services.

Resilience, Self-Advocacy, and Future Aspirations

Despite numerous challenges, Student B expressed strong determination to complete his education and pursue a career in social work.

“There are moments when I feel frustrated..... but I have learned that giving up is not an option. I know my challenges are real, but I also know that I have strengths. ADHD makes some things difficult, but it also makes me creative and able to think differently. Over time I have developed strategies that help me manage my work. It is not perfect..... but I keep trying.” He concluded by reflecting on his future goals.

“I want to become a professional social worker and support people who face barriers similar to the ones I have experienced. My journey has taught me the importance of understanding, empathy, and inclusion. I hope future students with ADHD will find colleges that are more aware and supportive than what exists now.”

Discussion

Student B's narrative reflects resilience, self-awareness, and determination. While institutional barriers continue to affect his educational experience, he actively develops coping strategies and maintains strong academic aspirations. His account demonstrates that inclusive education should not rely solely on student resilience but must be supported through systemic institutional change.

Case Summary

The case of Student B illustrates the complex interaction between neurodiversity, socio-economic disadvantage, and first-generation learner status. His experiences reveal significant challenges related to attention regulation, classroom engagement, academic assessment, financial constraints, and institutional awareness. The findings demonstrate how existing educational structures often fail to accommodate diverse cognitive needs, thereby creating policy–practice gaps in inclusive higher education. At the same time, the case highlights the importance of peer support, body doubling, self-advocacy, and resilience as mechanisms that enable continued participation and engagement. Through the lens of Universal Design for Learning, Intersectionality Theory, and Student Engagement Theory, Student B's narrative underscores the need for more flexible, responsive, and neurodiversity-inclusive educational practices.

RESPONDENT THREE – STUDENT C

Student C is a 22-year-old female undergraduate student (BA Political Science) studying in an urban college. She identifies with a queer sexuality and comes from a socio-culturally marginalized background. She is currently in the third year of her programme. Her experiences reflect the intersection of sexuality and socio-cultural marginalization within higher education.

Regarding her identity within the campus, Student C expressed concerns about visibility and acceptance.

She stated,

“I am not very open about my identity in college... I only share it with a few close friends because I am not sure how others will react.”

This indicates a climate of partial disclosure shaped by perceived social risk.

On peer interactions, she described instances of subtle exclusion. She said,

“Sometimes people make jokes or comments about LGBTQ+ people... they may not say it directly to me, but it still affects me.”

This reflects the presence of micro aggressions and heteronormative attitudes in everyday campus culture.

Student C also highlighted the lack of institutional support systems. She explained,

“There are no proper support groups or safe spaces in the college where students like me can openly express ourselves.”

This demonstrates a gap between inclusive policy discourse and actual support mechanisms.

In classroom settings, she noted the absence of representation in the curriculum. She stated,

“Topics related to gender and sexuality are rarely discussed... even when they are, it is very limited and not in depth.”

This suggests exclusion at the level of knowledge production and pedagogy.

She further spoke about faculty sensitivity. She mentioned,

“Some teachers are understanding, but many avoid discussing these topics... it feels like it is not considered important.”

This indicates uneven levels of awareness among educators.

From a socio-cultural perspective, she described additional pressures. She said,

“My background is already conservative... so I feel like I am managing two different identities, one at home and one in college.”

This reflects identity negotiation shaped by cultural expectations.

Despite these challenges, Student C expressed a desire for change. She stated,

“I wish colleges would create more awareness and acceptance... it would make a big difference for students like me.”

Regarding her overall experience, she concluded,

“Inclusion is talked about, but not fully practiced when it comes to sexuality.”

Student C’s narrative highlights how queer identity and socio-cultural marginalization intersect to shape experiences of exclusion, emphasizing the gap between formal inclusion policies and lived realities in higher education.

RESPONDENT FOUR – TEACHER D

Teacher D is a 45-year-old female assistant professor teaching Sociology in an urban college. She belongs to the general category and has 18 years of teaching experience. She has been part of the higher education system long enough to observe changes in institutional approaches to inclusion.

Regarding inclusive education policies, Teacher D acknowledged their presence at the institutional level.

She stated,

“There are clear guidelines about inclusion from higher authorities... colleges are expected to follow them.”

This reflects formal policy awareness within the system.

However, she highlighted gaps in practical implementation. She explained, *“In reality, implementation depends a lot on individual teachers... there is no uniform practice across departments.”*

This indicates decentralization and inconsistency in applying inclusive measures.

On classroom practices, she described attempts to accommodate diverse learners. She said, *“I try to make my classes interactive and flexible... but with large class sizes, it becomes difficult to address every student’s need.”*

This points to structural constraints affecting pedagogical inclusivity.

She also spoke about limited institutional support. She mentioned, *“There is very little formal training provided to teachers on handling students with different needs... we mostly learn through experience.”*

This suggests a gap in capacity-building for inclusive teaching.

Regarding students from marginalized backgrounds, she observed, *“Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often hesitate to participate... they lack confidence and sometimes basic academic support.”*

This reflects the impact of socio-economic and cultural factors on engagement.

Teacher D further noted challenges related to disability inclusion. She stated, *“Facilities are improving, but still not adequate... and teachers are not always equipped to provide the right academic adjustments.”*

This highlights both infrastructural and pedagogical limitations.

On issues of gender and sexuality, she expressed cautious engagement. She said, *“These topics are sensitive... some teachers avoid them to prevent controversy, even though they are important.”*

This indicates institutional hesitation in addressing intersectional inclusion.

Despite these constraints, she expressed a commitment to inclusive values. She stated, *“Inclusion is important for equity in education... but it requires more structured support and clear implementation strategies.”*

Regarding overall institutional functioning, she concluded, *“There is a gap between what policies say and what actually happens in classrooms.”*

Teacher D’s perspective highlights systemic and institutional barriers, emphasizing how lack of training, infrastructural limitations, and inconsistent practices contribute to policy–practice gaps in inclusive higher education.

RESPONDENT FIVE – TEACHER E

Teacher E is a 39-year-old male assistant professor teaching Social Work in a rural college. He belongs to an OBC community and has 12 years of teaching experience. He regularly engages with students from diverse and marginalized socio-economic backgrounds.

Regarding inclusive education policies, Teacher E acknowledged their importance but pointed out contextual limitations. He stated,

“Policies are there, but rural colleges face more challenges in implementing them due to limited resources.”

This reflects structural disparities between urban and rural institutions.

On classroom engagement, he highlighted the diversity of student backgrounds. He said,

“Many students are first-generation learners... they need more guidance and support compared to others.”

This indicates the need for differentiated pedagogical approaches.

He also spoke about financial constraints affecting students’ participation. He explained,

“Some students struggle to afford basic materials or travel... this directly affects their attendance and performance.”

This demonstrates how economic disadvantage impacts learning outcomes.

Regarding institutional support, he noted infrastructural and administrative gaps. He stated,

“There are no specialized support systems like counselors or resource centers in many rural colleges.” This points to limited institutional mechanisms for inclusion.

Teacher E further discussed challenges in addressing learning differences. He mentioned, “We do not have formal training to handle students with conditions like ADHD or learning disabilities... we try to manage based on experience.”

This reflects a gap in professional preparedness for inclusive education.

On social dynamics, he observed that socio-cultural factors influence student behavior. He said,

“Students from marginalized communities sometimes hesitate to speak in class due to fear or lack of confidence.”

This highlights the role of cultural capital in academic engagement.

He also noted the importance of relational support. He explained,

“I try to build rapport with students so they feel comfortable approaching me... that helps in improving their participation.”

This indicates reliance on informal strategies to bridge institutional gaps.

Despite challenges, he emphasized commitment to inclusive practice. He stated,
“In social work education, inclusion is a core value... but we need more institutional backing to practice it effectively.”

Regarding overall implementation, he concluded,
“There is a clear gap between policy and practice, especially in rural settings where resources are limited.”

Teacher E’s account focuses on how rural institutional constraints, combined with socio-economic and cultural factors, contribute to policy–practice gaps in inclusive higher education.

RESPONDENT SIX – TEACHER F

Teacher F is a 50-year-old female associate professor teaching Political Science in an urban college. She belongs to an SC community and has 22 years of teaching experience. Her professional trajectory reflects both institutional engagement and lived experience of social marginalization.

Regarding inclusive education policies, Teacher F acknowledged their progressive intent. She stated,

“On paper, policies are quite strong and emphasize equity and inclusion... especially after recent reforms.”

This indicates awareness of formal frameworks promoting inclusion.

However, she pointed out inconsistencies in implementation. She explained,
“In practice, inclusion is not uniform... it often depends on the commitment of individual departments and administrators.”

This reflects variability in institutional accountability.

Drawing from her own social background, she highlighted structural inequalities within academia. She said,

“Students from marginalized communities still face subtle forms of exclusion... it may not be direct, but it exists in attitudes and expectations.”

This suggests the persistence of implicit bias within educational spaces.

On classroom dynamics, she noted differential participation patterns. She stated, *“Some students hesitate to speak because they feel judged... especially those from disadvantaged or reserved category backgrounds.”*

This points to the influence of caste and social positioning on engagement.

She also discussed curriculum-related limitations. She mentioned, *“Critical perspectives on caste, gender, and inequality are included, but not always explored deeply... sometimes it remains theoretical.”*

This reflects a gap between critical pedagogy and transformative practice.

Regarding institutional support systems, she observed partial development. She said, *“Committees and cells are formed for inclusion, but their functioning is not always active or visible to students.”*

This indicates symbolic compliance rather than effective implementation.

Teacher F further addressed issues of representation. She explained, *“Representation matters... when students see faculty from diverse backgrounds, it creates a sense of belonging.”*

This highlights the importance of diversity within academic staff.

Despite these challenges, she emphasized the need for systemic change. She stated, *“Inclusion cannot be limited to policy documents... it requires continuous effort, monitoring, and accountability.”*

Reflecting on her overall experience, she concluded, *“There is progress, but the gap between policy and lived reality is still significant.”*

Teacher F’s perspective emphasizes the intersection of caste, institutional structures, and pedagogical practices, illustrating how entrenched inequalities and inconsistent implementation contribute to policy - practice gaps in inclusive higher education.

CHAPTER 5: THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed thematic analysis and critical discussion of the data collected from student and teacher respondents across selected colleges in Thiruvananthapuram. The analysis is grounded in a qualitative interpretive framework, enabling an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and institutional realities related to inclusive higher education.

Using thematic analysis, responses were systematically coded, categorized, and synthesized into major themes and sub-themes. These themes reflect recurring patterns associated with institutional practices, accessibility, socio-cultural exclusion, pedagogical processes, student engagement, and support systems. The discussion integrates empirical findings with theoretical frameworks such as the Social Model of Disability, Intersectionality, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), thereby situating the findings within a broader conceptual context.

The chapter also aligns with the study objectives and research questions, particularly focusing on how inclusive practices are implemented, how socio-cultural barriers operate within institutional settings, and how these factors influence student engagement and learning outcomes. The analysis reveals that inclusion is not merely an institutional provision but a dynamic process shaped by structural conditions, pedagogical approaches, and socio-cultural interactions.

Theme 1: Policy–Practice Gap in Inclusive Higher Education

The findings reveal a significant and persistent gap between the formal articulation of inclusive education policies and their actual implementation within higher education institutions. While policies at national and institutional levels emphasize equity, accessibility, and participation, their operationalization remains inconsistent and fragmented.

This gap reflects what implementation theory describes as a “policy–practice disjunction,” where policy intent is not effectively translated into actionable practices due to lack of institutional accountability, monitoring mechanisms, and resource allocation. Inclusion, therefore, becomes dependent on individual initiative rather than systemic enforcement.

Student A's statement,

"Inclusion is there in theory, but in practice, it is not fully there yet,"

Captures the experiential reality of this gap, where policy provisions fail to ensure meaningful participation.

Similarly, Teacher D's observation,

"Implementation depends a lot on individual teachers," highlights decentralization and absence of institutional standardization.

Teacher F further reinforces this by stating,

"In practice, inclusion is not uniform... it depends on departments," indicating variability across institutional contexts.

Discussion

From an intersectional perspective, this inconsistency disproportionately affects marginalized students, as their access to inclusive practices becomes contingent rather than guaranteed. The lack of institutionalization results in unequal educational experiences, reinforcing systemic inequities.

1.1 Inconsistent Implementation

This sub-theme highlights the absence of standardized frameworks and accountability systems for implementing inclusive policies. Practices vary significantly across departments and institutions, leading to fragmented inclusion.

Verbatim:

Teacher D stated,

"There is no uniform practice across departments."

Teacher E added,

"Rural colleges face more challenges due to limited resources."

Discussion

This reflects structural inequities between urban and rural institutions, where resource disparities influence policy execution. The absence of monitoring mechanisms further weakens implementation, resulting in uneven distribution of inclusive practices.

1.2 Symbolic Inclusion

Institutions often demonstrate compliance through the formation of committees and policies without ensuring their effective functioning. This reflects tokenism, where inclusion is symbolic rather than transformative.

Verbatim:

Teacher F stated,

“Committees and cells are formed... but not always active.”

Discussion

Symbolic inclusion aligns with the concept of performative institutionalism, where institutions prioritize compliance over impact. This undermines the transformative potential of inclusive education and reduces it to administrative formality.

Theme 2: Structural and Infrastructural Barriers

The findings indicate that infrastructural inadequacies remain a critical barrier to inclusive education. Despite policy mandates, physical accessibility and institutional resources are insufficient and unevenly distributed.

Student A’s statement,

“Some buildings have ramps, but not all,” illustrates fragmented accessibility.

Teacher D noted,

“Facilities are improving, but still not adequate,” indicating incremental but incomplete progress.

Discussion

From the Social Model of Disability, these barriers are not individual limitations but structural failures.

Institutional environments are not designed to accommodate diverse needs, thereby producing exclusion.

2.1 Physical Accessibility Issues

Barriers related to mobility and navigation directly affect participation and attendance.

Verbatim:

Student A said,

“There are no lifts in some buildings... it becomes difficult.”

Discussion

Such infrastructural deficits restrict physical access to education, leading to institutional exclusion. Accessibility remains partial rather than universal, contradicting inclusive policy mandates.

2.2 Resource Constraints

Lack of support services, assistive technologies, and trained personnel further limits inclusion.

Verbatim:

Teacher E stated,

“There are no specialized support systems.”

Discussion

This reflects systemic underinvestment in inclusive infrastructure, particularly in rural institutions. The absence of resource centers and counseling services limits both academic and psychosocial support.

Theme 3: Pedagogical and Academic Rigidities

The study reveals that rigid teaching methods and standardized assessment systems fail to accommodate diverse learning needs. The persistence of a “one-size-fits-all” approach undermines inclusive pedagogy.

Student B stated,

“Long lectures are difficult for me... I lose track,” highlighting cognitive barriers for neuro-divergent learners.

He further noted,

“Deadlines are the same for everyone,” indicating lack of flexibility.

Discussion

These findings align with critiques of traditional pedagogy, which prioritize uniformity over diversity. The absence of differentiated instruction limits engagement and participation.

3.1 Lack of Flexible Pedagogy

Teaching practices are not adapted to diverse cognitive and learning needs.

Verbatim:

Student B said,

“There is no system that supports how I learn... like body doubling.”

Teacher D stated,

“Large class sizes make it difficult to address every need.”

Discussion

This highlights the need for UDL-based approaches that accommodate multiple learning styles. The absence of such practices disproportionately affects neurodivergent and first-generation learners.

3.2 Rigid Assessment Practices

Uniform evaluation systems create structural disadvantages.

Verbatim:

Student B stated,

“I need more time, but deadlines are fixed.”

Discussion

Standardized assessments fail to account for diverse learning processes, reinforcing inequity in academic outcomes. Flexible assessment models are necessary for inclusive education.

Theme 4: Intersectional Marginalization and Social Exclusion

The findings demonstrate that student experiences are shaped by intersecting identities, including caste, gender, disability, sexuality, and socio-economic status. These intersections produce layered forms of exclusion.

Student C stated,

“I am not very open about my identity,” reflecting identity-based vulnerability.

Student A

noted, *“I feel left out,” indicating social exclusion.*

Teacher F observed,

“Subtle forms of exclusion still exist.”

Discussion

Intersectionality theory explains how overlapping identities intensify marginalization. Inclusion cannot be addressed through single-axis frameworks but requires a multidimensional approach.

4.1 Macroaggressions and Subtle Discrimination

Exclusion often occurs through indirect behaviors and attitudes.

Verbatim:

Student C said,

“People make jokes about LGBTQ+ people.”

Discussion

Macroaggressions contribute to psychological distress and reduced sense of belonging, affecting student engagement and well-being.

4.2 Lack of Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Absence of institutional support for identity expression leads to invisibility.

Verbatim:

Student C stated,

“There are no proper support groups.”

Discussion

Safe spaces are essential for psychosocial inclusion. Their absence reflects institutional neglect of identity-based needs.

Theme 5: Limited Institutional Support and Awareness

The study identifies gaps in awareness, communication, and institutional support systems.

Student A stated,

“Students are not always aware of policies.”

Student B noted,

“There is very little understanding about ADHD.”

Discussion

Lack of awareness reduces accessibility of existing provisions, limiting their effectiveness.

5.1 Lack of Awareness

Stakeholders lack knowledge about inclusive practices.

Verbatim:

Student B said,

“Teachers don’t always recognize ADHD.”

Discussion

This reflects gaps in conceptual understanding of neurodiversity, leading to misinterpretation and stigma.

5.2 Insufficient Training for Faculty

Teachers lack formal training in inclusive pedagogy.

Verbatim:

Teacher D stated,

“There is very little formal training.”

Teacher E added,

“We do not have training to handle learning disabilities.”

Discussion

Capacity-building is essential for effective implementation of inclusive practices. Lack of training limits teachers’ ability to address diverse needs.

Theme 6: Coping Strategies and Aspirational Resilience

Despite systemic barriers, students demonstrate adaptive coping strategies, while teachers rely on informal support mechanisms.

Student B stated,

“Body doubling helps me focus.”

Student A mentioned,

“I try to manage things on my own.”

Teacher E noted,

“I build rapport with students.”

Discussion

These strategies reflect resilience but also indicate absence of formal institutional support. Inclusion becomes individualized rather than systemic.

6.1 Informal Coping Mechanisms

Students develop personal strategies to manage challenges.

Verbatim:

Student B said,

“Body doubling helps me focus.”

Discussion

Such strategies highlight adaptive self-regulation but also underscore institutional gaps in supporting diverse learning needs.

6.2 Relational and Informal

Support Teachers rely on

interpersonal approaches.

Verbatim:

Teacher E stated,

“Building rapport helps participation.”

Discussion

While relational pedagogy is valuable, reliance on informal strategies indicates lack of structured systems for inclusion.

Overall Interpretation

The thematic analysis demonstrates that inclusive higher education is shaped by complex interactions between structural, institutional, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors. While policies articulate a vision of equity and inclusion, their implementation remains constrained by infrastructural limitations, lack of training, resource deficits, and intersectional inequalities.

The persistence of informal coping strategies indicates that inclusion is not yet institutionalized but individualized. This reinforces the need for systemic reforms that integrate inclusive principles into institutional structures, pedagogical practices, and policy implementation mechanisms.

Overall, the findings highlight that achieving meaningful inclusion requires a shift from symbolic compliance to transformative practice, supported by accountability, resource allocation, and intersectional sensitivity.

4.2 Profile of the Respondents

The study included a total of 6 respondents, comprising 3 students and 3 teachers from selected colleges.

- Students represented diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, including variations in gender, socioeconomic status, and academic streams. Their responses reflected lived experiences of inclusion, access, and participation within institutional settings.
- Teachers varied in teaching experience and institutional roles, providing insights into pedagogical practices, institutional policies, and challenges in implementing inclusive education.

5.2 Question-Wise Analysis and Discussion

Research Question 1

What experiences of inclusion and exclusion do students encounter in higher education institutions?

The findings reveal that students experience inclusion and exclusion in complex, multifaceted, and often contradictory ways. While participants acknowledged several positive institutional efforts aimed at promoting diversity and participation, they also described numerous barriers that affected their ability to engage fully in academic and social life. Inclusion was not experienced as a uniform reality; rather, it varied depending on individual circumstances, institutional responsiveness, peer interactions, and faculty support.

A recurring finding across all cases was that students often experienced both inclusion and exclusion simultaneously. While they appreciated supportive teachers, helpful peers, and certain institutional initiatives, they also encountered barriers related to accessibility, identity, socio-economic background, and institutional awareness. This suggests that inclusion exists along a continuum rather than as a fixed condition.

The analysis generated two major themes: Experiences of Inclusion are Uneven and Context Dependent and Subtle Forms of Exclusion Continue to Exist.

Theme 1: Experiences of Inclusion are Uneven and Context-Dependent

Participants generally acknowledged that colleges have become more diverse and inclusive compared to previous decades. Students reported positive experiences with supportive teachers, peer relationships, and certain institutional initiatives. However, these

experiences were often inconsistent and depended heavily on specific individuals and contexts.

Student A explained:

“Some teachers are very supportive and understanding..... they try to accommodate students when difficulties arise. There are faculty members who genuinely listen and make an effort to understand what students are going through. When I approach them, I feel comfortable discussing my concerns. But support is not always consistent. Sometimes you receive help immediately..... other times you have to explain your situation again and again. It depends on who you approach and whether they understand your difficulties.”

The participant's response demonstrates that inclusion is often mediated through interpersonal relationships rather than institutional systems. Although support exists, it is not experienced uniformly across educational settings.

Similarly, Student B described a mixed experience of inclusion:

“I have been fortunate to meet a few teachers and classmates who understand how I learn. They know that if I am struggling to complete something, it does not mean I am lazy or uninterested. They try to support me and that makes a huge difference. But there are also situations where people don't understand ADHD at all. Sometimes they think I am careless or not trying hard enough. So whether I feel included or not depends a lot on the people around me.”

The findings suggest that students' experiences of inclusion are strongly influenced by awareness and understanding among faculty and peers. In environments where diversity is acknowledged and supported, students report higher levels of comfort and participation. In contrast, lack of awareness often contributes to feelings of exclusion.

Teacher D also acknowledged this inconsistency:

“Students' experiences differ considerably depending on the department, faculty members, and institutional culture. Some teachers actively try to create inclusive classrooms..... others continue using traditional approaches without considering diverse student needs. Because of this, students do not experience inclusion in the same way.” Teacher E similarly observed:

“Many institutions genuinely want to be inclusive, but implementation varies. Some students receive strong support while others struggle to access the same opportunities. Inclusion is often dependent on available resources and individual initiative.”

Discussion

The findings indicate that inclusion remains unevenly distributed within higher education institutions. Although positive practices exist, they are not consistently embedded within institutional systems. Students often experience inclusion through supportive individuals rather than through structured institutional mechanisms.

This finding supports existing research suggesting that inclusive education is most effective when it becomes part of institutional culture rather than relying on individual goodwill. The experiences of participants indicate that inclusion remains fragile when it depends solely on personal commitment.

From the perspective of Student Engagement Theory, supportive relationships enhance behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Students who feel understood and supported are more likely to participate actively in academic and social activities. Conversely, inconsistent support may undermine engagement and contribute to uncertainty regarding belonging and participation.

Theme 2: Subtle Forms of Exclusion Continue to Exist

While overt discrimination was rarely reported by participants, subtle forms of exclusion emerged as a significant aspect of student experiences. Students described situations where they felt marginalized, invisible, misunderstood, or excluded through everyday interactions rather than direct acts of discrimination.

Student C provided a particularly powerful description of these experiences:

“Nobody directly says that I don't belong here..... but there are moments when conversations, jokes, or assumptions make you feel invisible. Sometimes people make comments about LGBTQ+ individuals without realizing that someone sitting beside them may be affected by those comments. It is not one major incident that stands out. It is the accumulation of many small experiences. Individually they may seem insignificant..... but together they shape how comfortable and accepted you feel.”

The participant's narrative illustrates how exclusion often operates through micro-aggressions and social assumptions rather than explicit hostility. These experiences can

have a significant impact on emotional well-being and participation despite appearing minor to others.

Student A also described subtle forms of exclusion associated with disability:

“Most people are not intentionally discriminatory..... but there are situations where they make assumptions about what I can or cannot do. During group activities, people sometimes decide things without asking for my opinion. Sometimes they assume I will not be able to contribute equally. Nobody says it directly..... but you can feel it. Those moments make you wonder whether people see you as a student first or as a person with a disability.”

Similarly, Student B reflected on the stigma associated with ADHD:

“A lot of people do not understand ADHD. They assume that if you are struggling with deadlines or concentration, it is because you are irresponsible. They cannot see the effort that goes into managing these difficulties. Those assumptions can be frustrating because they make you feel misunderstood.” Teacher F described how exclusion has evolved over time:

“Direct discrimination has reduced significantly compared to the past. What we see now are more subtle forms of exclusion. It may appear through low expectations, assumptions about students' abilities, social distance, or unconscious bias. These experiences are harder to identify and challenge because they are often normalized.”

The findings suggest that exclusion within higher education institutions frequently operates through social attitudes, stereotypes, and implicit biases. Such forms of exclusion may not violate formal policies, yet they continue to influence students' educational experiences.

Discussion

The findings highlight the importance of understanding exclusion as a multidimensional phenomenon. Contemporary forms of exclusion often function through everyday interactions, institutional silence, and social assumptions rather than overt discrimination.

From an Intersectionality perspective, these experiences are shaped by multiple dimensions of identity. Students may simultaneously encounter barriers related to

disability, sexuality, socio-economic status, caste, or other social positions. The interaction of these identities can intensify experiences of exclusion and create unique challenges.

The findings also support literature on micro-aggressions and symbolic exclusion, which suggests that repeated exposure to subtle negative experiences can have cumulative psychological effects. Participants frequently described feeling invisible, misunderstood, or undervalued despite the absence of direct hostility.

Such experiences influence emotional engagement, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. When students perceive that their identities or experiences are not fully acknowledged, they may become less likely to participate actively in academic and social life.

Research Question 2

How do students perceive the inclusiveness of institutional practices and support systems?

The findings indicate that students generally perceive their institutions as making efforts toward inclusion; however, these efforts are often viewed as incomplete, inconsistent, and insufficiently integrated into everyday academic life. Participants acknowledged the existence of institutional policies, support services, committees, and awareness programmes aimed at promoting inclusion. Nevertheless, they frequently described a gap between the formal presence of these initiatives and their actual effectiveness in addressing students' needs.

Students appreciated supportive faculty members, scholarship opportunities, counseling services, and administrative accommodations when available. However, many participants reported that access to these supports was often dependent on individual initiative, awareness, and institutional responsiveness. As a result, support systems were perceived as helpful but not always accessible or reliable.

The analysis generated two major themes: **Institutional Commitment Exists but Implementation is Inconsistent** and **Support Systems Are Available but Limited in Scope and Accessibility**.

Theme 1: Institutional Commitment Exists but Implementation is Inconsistent

Participants acknowledged that higher education institutions increasingly recognize the importance of inclusion. Colleges have established policies, committees, awareness programmes, and support structures intended to address student diversity and promote equitable participation. These developments were generally viewed as positive indicators of institutional commitment.

Student A stated:

“The college does make efforts..... there are awareness programmes, discussions about inclusion, and policies that talk about equality. On paper, there seems to be a commitment to supporting students from different backgrounds. But when support is needed in practice, the experience can be very different.

Sometimes you have to keep following up or explaining your situation before anything actually happens.” Similarly, Student C observed:

“I think institutions want to be inclusive..... but there is often a difference between intention and reality. There are policies and awareness campaigns, but students do not always feel the impact of those initiatives in their daily experiences.”

Teacher D also highlighted this issue:

“Most institutions have developed structures related to inclusion, but implementation varies significantly. Some departments actively engage with these initiatives..... others do very little. Students' experiences often depend on where they are located within the institution.”

Teacher F further reflected:

“Colleges are certainly more aware of inclusion today than they were in the past. The challenge is ensuring that policies become part of everyday institutional culture rather than remaining administrative requirements.”

Discussion

The findings suggest that institutional commitment to inclusion is visible but unevenly translated into practice. Students recognize efforts being made at the policy level, yet they often encounter difficulties when attempting to access practical support.

This pattern reflects the policy–practice gap frequently identified in inclusive education literature. While institutions may formally endorse inclusion, the effectiveness of implementation depends on institutional culture, resource allocation, accountability mechanisms, and staff engagement.

The findings indicate that inclusion has not yet become a fully institutionalized practice. Instead, implementation often relies on individual commitment and departmental initiative rather than systematic organizational processes.

Theme 2: Support Systems are Available but Limited in Scope and Accessibility

Another important finding concerns students' perceptions of institutional support systems. Participants acknowledged the existence of scholarships, mentoring opportunities, faculty support, counseling services, and administrative accommodations. However, they also reported limitations related to awareness, accessibility, responsiveness, and adequacy.

Student B described his experiences with institutional support:

“Most of the support I receive comes from individual teachers and friends rather than formal systems. There are resources available, but many students do not know how to access them. Sometimes support exists..... but it is not visible enough for students who actually need it.”

Student A similarly noted:

“There are support mechanisms, but information about them is not always communicated clearly. Sometimes students only learn about available services after experiencing difficulties. It would be better if support was more visible and easier to access.”

Student C discussed the absence of support specifically addressing LGBTQ+ concerns:

“I have never seen a support group or programme specifically focused on LGBTQ+ students. Maybe some resources exist..... but they are not visible. Most students depend on close friends rather than institutional support.”

Teacher E emphasized resource-related challenges:

“Support services exist, but institutions often lack sufficient staff, funding, and infrastructure. Colleges may want to provide more comprehensive support, but practical limitations affect what they can actually offer.”

Discussion

The findings reveal that the effectiveness of support systems depends not only on their existence but also on their accessibility and visibility. Students frequently rely on informal networks because formal mechanisms are difficult to access or inadequately publicized.

The results suggest that institutions need to strengthen communication, awareness, and coordination regarding support services. Inclusive support systems should be proactive rather than reactive, ensuring that students receive assistance before difficulties escalate.

Overall, students perceive institutional support systems as valuable but insufficiently integrated into the educational environment. This limits their potential impact on participation, engagement, and well-being.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that students generally view institutions as committed to inclusion but perceive significant limitations in implementation and support delivery. While policies, programmes, and services exist, they are not always experienced as effective, accessible, or consistent. Students frequently rely on individual faculty members and peer networks rather than institutional systems. These findings suggest that meaningful inclusion requires not only the development of policies and support structures but also sustained efforts to ensure their visibility, accessibility, and effectiveness within everyday institutional life.

Research Question 3

How do students' social and cultural backgrounds influence their educational experiences?

The findings reveal that students' educational experiences are significantly shaped by their social and cultural backgrounds. Factors such as socio-economic status, disability, first-generation learner status, sexuality, caste, and family context influence how students participate, engage, and navigate higher education environments. Participants consistently emphasized that educational experiences cannot be understood solely through academic performance because broader social realities continue to affect opportunities, confidence, participation, and access to resources.

The findings suggest that students from marginalized backgrounds often face additional challenges that extend beyond the classroom. These challenges influence both academic

and social experiences, shaping students' perceptions of inclusion, belonging, and success within higher education institutions.

Theme 1: Socio-Economic and Educational Backgrounds Shape Participation

Participants frequently identified financial constraints and educational disadvantage as important influences on their higher education experiences. Students from low-income families and first-generation learner backgrounds described additional pressures that affected participation and engagement.

Student A explained:

“People often think disability is my biggest challenge..... but financial stress affects me every day. Transportation, study materials, project expenses, and other costs create constant pressure. When you are worried about money, it becomes difficult to focus completely on academics.” Student B similarly reflected on being a first-generation learner:

“Nobody in my family has gone through higher education before. My parents support me emotionally, but they cannot guide me through the academic system. Many things that other students seem to know automatically..... internships, research opportunities, networking..... I had to figure out on my own.” Teacher E observed:

“Many students enter higher education carrying disadvantages that are not visible. Some are dealing with financial hardship, limited educational support at home, and responsibilities outside college. These realities directly influence engagement and academic performance.”

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that socio-economic circumstances influence students' ability to engage fully in higher education. Financial stress, limited educational resources, and lack of academic guidance create additional barriers that affect participation and learning outcomes.

These findings support theories of educational inequality, which emphasize that access to higher education does not eliminate broader social disparities. Students continue to

experience the effects of social and economic disadvantage even after entering educational institutions.

Theme 2: Identity and Social Location Influence Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

Participants also described how personal identities and social locations influence educational experiences. Disability, sexuality, caste, and other identity markers shape interactions, perceptions, and opportunities within higher education settings.

Student C reflected on the influence of queer identity:

“I am not completely open about my sexuality in college..... only a few people know. It is not because someone told me not to talk about it. It is because you constantly observe how people react and decide what feels safe to share. That affects how comfortable you feel participating in certain conversations and social situations.”

Student A discussed assumptions related to disability:

“Sometimes people assume they know what I can or cannot do. They may not mean any harm..... but those assumptions still affect how they interact with me. It can make you feel different even when you are trying to participate like everyone else.”

Teacher F highlighted the continuing influence of social background:

“Students bring their social histories into educational institutions. Their confidence, participation, and sense of belonging are often shaped by experiences that began long before they entered higher education.”

Discussion

The findings support Intersectionality Theory, which argues that individuals experience privilege and disadvantage through multiple interconnected identities. Students do not experience educational environments in identical ways because their social locations influence how they are perceived and how they navigate institutional spaces.

The findings further suggest that inclusion requires attention to diversity beyond visible characteristics. Institutions must recognize the complex ways in which social identities influence educational experiences and opportunities.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that students' social and cultural backgrounds play a significant role in shaping their educational experiences. Socio-economic disadvantage, first-generation learner status, disability, sexuality, and other identity factors influence participation, engagement, confidence, and access to opportunities. These experiences highlight the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to inclusive education. Meaningful inclusion requires institutions to recognize and respond to the diverse realities that students bring into higher education environments.

Research Question 4

What barriers and facilitators affect students' academic and social participation?

The findings reveal that students' participation in higher education is influenced by a combination of barriers and facilitators operating at individual, institutional, academic, and social levels. While students demonstrated resilience and determination in pursuing their education, their ability to participate fully in academic and social activities was often shaped by factors beyond their control. Participants identified structural barriers, socio-cultural challenges, financial constraints, inaccessible learning environments, and limited institutional awareness as factors that restricted participation. At the same time, supportive peers, empathetic faculty members, flexible teaching practices, and informal support networks emerged as important facilitators that enhanced engagement and inclusion.

Theme 1: Institutional and Structural Barriers to Participation

Participants consistently reported that institutional structures and academic systems often created obstacles to meaningful participation. These barriers affected students' ability to engage fully in both academic and social aspects of college life.

Student A described challenges related to accessibility:

“Some buildings have ramps..... but not all. There are places where accessibility has improved, but there are still areas that are difficult to reach independently. Sometimes moving between classrooms becomes exhausting. People often assume accessibility is solved once a ramp is built..... but there are many barriers that still remain.”

Student B highlighted difficulties associated with traditional teaching methods:

“Long lectures are one of the hardest parts of college for me. I try to pay attention, but after some time my concentration begins to fade. By the end of the class, I sometimes feel like I have missed important information even though I was trying my best to focus.”

Student C discussed the impact of social assumptions:

“Sometimes participation is affected by whether you feel comfortable being yourself. When you are constantly thinking about how people might react, you become more cautious about speaking openly or joining certain discussions.”

Teacher D also identified systemic challenges:

“Many institutions still rely on rigid academic structures. Assessment systems, attendance requirements, and teaching methods are often designed around the assumption that all students learn and participate in the same way.”

Teacher E similarly observed:

“Students face barriers that are not always visible. Financial difficulties, family responsibilities, transportation issues, and emotional stress can all affect participation, but these factors are rarely considered within academic systems.”

Discussion

The findings indicate that participation barriers are multidimensional. Students encounter obstacles not only because of personal circumstances but also because institutional systems are often designed around standardized assumptions regarding learning, mobility, and engagement.

From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, barriers emerge when environments fail to accommodate diversity. Similarly, student engagement literature suggests that participation is influenced by institutional responsiveness and support structures. The findings therefore demonstrate that barriers are often produced by the interaction between students' circumstances and institutional conditions.

Theme 2: Supportive Relationships and Inclusive Practices as Facilitators

Despite the challenges identified, participants also described several factors that enhanced participation and engagement. Supportive relationships emerged as one of the most significant facilitators across all cases.

Student B reflected on the importance of peer support:

“Without my friends, managing academics would be much harder. Sometimes just having somebody sit with me while I study makes a huge difference. They help me stay focused and motivated when I am struggling.”

Student A similarly emphasized the role of supportive classmates:

“Some classmates are extremely supportive. They help me move around campus, share notes, and make sure I am included in activities. Those small actions make participation much easier.” Student C highlighted the value of trusted social networks:

“Having a few people who understand and accept you makes a huge difference. It creates a sense of safety and allows you to participate more confidently.” Faculty support also emerged as an important facilitator.

Student A stated:

“There are teachers who genuinely listen and try to understand students' situations. When faculty members are approachable and flexible, it becomes much easier to participate.”

Teacher F acknowledged the impact of faculty behavior:

“A supportive teacher can completely change a student's experience. Sometimes students simply need someone who believes in their abilities and encourages them to participate.”

Teacher D further noted:

“Students engage more actively when they feel respected and valued. Inclusive teaching practices create opportunities for participation that might otherwise be lost.”

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that supportive relationships function as protective factors that reduce the impact of exclusionary experiences. Peer support, faculty empathy, and inclusive teaching practices enhance students' confidence, motivation, and engagement.

Consistent with Student Engagement Theory, participation is strengthened when students experience positive relationships and supportive learning environments. These findings suggest that institutions can promote inclusion by fostering collaborative, respectful, and responsive educational cultures.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that students' academic and social participation is shaped by both barriers and facilitators. Structural limitations, rigid pedagogical practices, financial difficulties, and socio-cultural challenges restrict participation, while supportive peers, empathetic faculty members, and inclusive practices enhance engagement. Meaningful inclusion therefore requires institutions not only to remove barriers but also to actively create conditions that encourage participation and belonging.

Research Question 5

How do students describe their sense of belonging within the college environment?

The findings reveal that belonging is a central component of students' experiences within higher education institutions. Participants consistently associated belonging with feeling accepted, respected, valued, and recognized as legitimate members of the college community. A strong sense of belonging enhanced participation, confidence, and engagement, whereas feelings of invisibility, marginalization, or exclusion weakened students' connection to the institution.

The findings indicate that belonging is shaped by interpersonal relationships, institutional culture, representation, accessibility, and opportunities for participation. Students described belonging not simply as physical presence within the institution but as the experience of being acknowledged and included within academic and social spaces.

The analysis generated two major themes: Belonging Through Acceptance and Support and Experiences that Undermine Belonging.

Theme 1: Belonging Through Acceptance and Support

Participants frequently described belonging as emerging from positive relationships and supportive environments. Feeling understood and accepted by peers and faculty contributed significantly to students' connection with the institution.

Student C stated:

“There are times when I feel connected to the college community..... especially when I am with close friends. Around people who understand me, I don't feel the need to constantly monitor what I say or how

I behave. That creates a sense of comfort and

belonging.” Student B similarly explained:

“When teachers understand how I learn and do not judge me for struggling with certain things, I feel more confident participating. It makes me feel like I belong in the classroom.”

Student A described belonging in relation to inclusion:

“Belonging means being treated like any other student. It means not feeling that your challenges define who you are. When people focus on what you can contribute rather than your limitations, you feel included.”

Teacher F reflected on the importance of recognition:

“Students develop a sense of belonging when they feel seen, heard, and respected. Belonging is created through everyday interactions that communicate acceptance and value.” Teacher D also emphasized the role of participation:

“Students are more likely to feel connected to the institution when they have opportunities to participate and contribute. Belonging develops when students feel that their presence matters.”

Discussion

The findings indicate that belonging is closely linked to acceptance, recognition, and meaningful participation. Students who experience supportive relationships are more likely to develop positive emotional connections with their institution.

Student Engagement Theory suggests that belonging is a critical factor influencing academic persistence and success. The findings support this perspective by demonstrating that students who feel accepted are more likely to participate actively and engage with college life.

Theme 2: Experiences that Undermine Belonging

While participants described positive experiences of belonging, they also identified factors that weakened their connection to the institution.

Student C reflected:

“You can be surrounded by people and still feel invisible. Sometimes it is not about being excluded directly..... it is about feeling that certain parts of who you are are not acknowledged or understood.” Student A discussed the impact of accessibility barriers:

“There are times when accessibility issues make me feel like the institution was not designed with students like me in mind. Those experiences affect your sense of belonging because they remind you that participation is not equally easy for everyone.”

Student B described the effects of misunderstanding:

“When people assume you are lazy or careless because they don't understand ADHD, it can make you feel like you don't fit in. It becomes harder to ask for help or participate openly.” Teacher F observed:

“Students' sense of belonging is affected when they constantly feel they have to prove themselves. Belonging requires more than access..... it requires recognition and respect.”

Teacher E similarly noted:

“Students who face financial difficulties, social disadvantages, or personal challenges sometimes feel disconnected from campus life because they are carrying burdens that others may not see.”

Discussion

The findings suggest that belonging is weakened when students experience invisibility, misunderstanding, inaccessible environments, or limited representation. These experiences create emotional distance between students and their institutions.

The results also demonstrate that belonging is closely connected to inclusion. Students who perceive barriers to participation are less likely to feel fully integrated into the college community. Therefore, strengthening belonging requires institutions to address both structural and socio-cultural dimensions of exclusion.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that belonging is a multidimensional experience shaped by acceptance, support, recognition, participation, and institutional culture. Students develop a stronger sense of belonging when they feel respected, understood, and valued within academic and social environments. Conversely, experiences of invisibility, exclusion, misunderstanding, and inaccessible environments undermine students' connection to the institution. The findings highlight that belonging is not merely an outcome of enrollment but a critical dimension of inclusive higher education that influences participation, engagement, and overall educational experiences.

Table 5.1 Summary of Themes Derived from the Research Questions

Research Question	Major Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Findings
RQ1. What experiences of inclusion and exclusion do students encounter in higher education institutions?	Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion	1. Experiences of Inclusion are Uneven and Context-Dependent 2. Subtle Forms of Exclusion Continue to Exist	Students experienced inclusion through supportive teachers and peers; however, inclusion remained inconsistent across departments. Exclusion was often subtle, occurring through stereotypes, microaggressions, lack of

			representation, and everyday social interactions rather than overt discrimination.
RQ2. How do students perceive the inclusiveness of institutional practices and support systems?	Institutional Practices and Support Systems	1. Institutional Commitment Exists but Implementation is Inconsistent 2. Support Systems are Available but Limited in Scope and Accessibility	Participants acknowledged that institutions have inclusive policies, committees, and support services, but implementation was uneven. Support systems lacked visibility, accessibility, coordination, and adequate institutional follow-up, leading students to depend more on individual faculty and peers than formal mechanisms.
RQ3. How do students' social and cultural backgrounds influence their educational experiences?	Influence of Social and Cultural Backgrounds	1. Socio-Economic and Educational Backgrounds Shape Participation 2. Identity and Social Location Influence Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion	Students' experiences were shaped by financial status, disability, first-generation learner status, sexuality, and other social identities. These intersecting identities influenced confidence, participation, access to opportunities, and sense of inclusion within the institution.
RQ4. What barriers and facilitators affect students' academic and social participation?	Barriers and Facilitators to Participation	1. Institutional and Structural Barriers to Participation 2. Supportive Relationships and Inclusive Practices as Facilitators	Structural barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure, rigid pedagogy, financial constraints, and limited institutional awareness restricted participation. Conversely, empathetic faculty, supportive peers, flexible teaching approaches, and positive interpersonal relationships enhanced students' academic and social engagement.
RQ5. How do students describe their sense of belonging within	Sense of Belonging in Higher Education	1. Belonging Through Acceptance and Support 2. Experiences	Students associated belonging with acceptance, recognition, respect, and meaningful participation. Feelings of invisibility, misunderstanding,

the college environment?		that Undermine Belonging	inaccessible environments, and identity-based exclusion weakened their emotional connection to the institution and reduced participation
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Overall Themes	Summary
Policy–Practice Gap	Institutional commitment toward inclusive education exists, but implementation remains inconsistent across colleges and departments.
Structural and Institutional Barriers	Physical accessibility, inadequate resources, limited support services, and insufficient institutional preparedness continue to hinder inclusion.
Pedagogical Challenges	Traditional teaching methods and rigid assessment practices do not adequately accommodate diverse learning needs.
Intersectional Exclusion	Students experience overlapping forms of marginalization based on disability, socio-economic status, sexuality, caste, and other social identities.
Institutional Support	Existing support systems are valuable but often lack visibility, coordination, accessibility, and trained personnel.
Student Engagement and Belonging	Supportive relationships, inclusive teaching practices, and positive institutional culture promote engagement, participation, resilience, and a stronger sense of belonging, whereas exclusionary experiences undermine these outcomes.

5.3 Discussion of Theoretical Proposition

The findings of the study provide substantial support for the theoretical propositions underpinning the research by demonstrating that inclusive higher education extends beyond mere access to encompass equitable participation, meaningful engagement, and positive learning outcomes. The evidence indicates that although higher education institutions have made progress in expanding educational opportunities, significant gaps remain between policy intentions and actual institutional practices. These findings validate the relevance of the selected theoretical frameworks in explaining the policy–practice gaps in inclusive education within colleges of Thiruvananthapuram.

From the **Equity Perspective**, the findings reveal that increased access to higher education has not necessarily translated into equitable educational experiences. While students from diverse backgrounds are admitted into higher education institutions, disparities continue to exist in classroom participation, academic support, accessibility, and learning outcomes. Students from marginalized communities frequently encounter unequal opportunities to participate fully in academic and co-curricular activities due to structural, financial, and

institutional barriers. This confirms that inclusion cannot be measured solely by enrolment or physical access but must also ensure fairness in educational experiences, resources, and outcomes.

The findings also strongly support **Social Exclusion Theory**, which argues that exclusion is produced and sustained through institutional, economic, and socio-cultural mechanisms. Participants described several barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, financial hardships, discriminatory attitudes, inaccessible teaching practices, and limited institutional responsiveness to diversity. These barriers collectively restrict meaningful participation and reinforce the marginalization of students belonging to disadvantaged social groups. The persistence of such exclusion demonstrates that social inequalities continue to shape educational experiences despite the existence of inclusive policies.

The study further validates **Inclusive Education Theory**, which advocates for educational environments that accommodate the diverse needs of all learners. Although institutional stakeholders generally expressed positive attitudes toward inclusive education and acknowledged its importance, implementation remained inconsistent across colleges. Inclusive policies were often poorly operationalized due to limited awareness, insufficient faculty training, inadequate accessibility measures, and lack of institutional monitoring. Consequently, inclusion remained more of a policy aspiration than a consistently practiced educational approach, limiting its overall effectiveness in promoting equitable learning environments.

The findings are also consistent with **Constructivist Learning Theory**, which emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs through active participation, collaboration, and learner-centred teaching strategies. Many students reported that classroom instruction continued to rely heavily on traditional lecture-based methods with limited opportunities for interaction, collaborative learning, differentiated instruction, or adaptive teaching practices. Such pedagogical limitations reduced student engagement, participation, and knowledge construction, particularly for learners with diverse educational needs. These findings suggest that adopting constructivist teaching approaches could significantly enhance inclusive learning experiences and academic achievement.

The study additionally supports the principles of **Intersectionality**, which highlight that individuals often experience multiple, overlapping forms of disadvantage. Students belonging simultaneously to marginalized caste groups, economically weaker sections, women, persons with disabilities, first-generation learners, or gender and sexual minorities reported experiencing compounded barriers that affected their academic participation and social inclusion. Rather than facing a single form of exclusion, these students encountered interconnected structural disadvantages that intensified educational inequalities. The findings therefore emphasize the necessity of intersectional institutional policies capable of addressing the complex realities of diverse student populations.

Finally, the findings align with the **Ecological Perspective** within the psychosocial framework, which recognizes that individual development and well-being are shaped through continuous interactions between individuals and their social environments.

Participants highlighted that peer relationships, faculty attitudes, institutional culture, social stigma, and the availability of academic and psychosocial support significantly influenced their sense of belonging, confidence, participation, and overall educational experience. Supportive institutional environments promoted engagement and resilience, whereas negative peer dynamics, discrimination, and inadequate support services adversely affected students' psychological well-being and academic performance. These findings reinforce the importance of creating inclusive institutional ecosystems that simultaneously address structural, interpersonal, and psychosocial dimensions of inclusion.

Overall, the study confirms that inclusive higher education requires a multidimensional approach integrating equity, social justice, learner-centred pedagogy, institutional accountability, and psychosocial support. The convergence between the empirical findings and the theoretical propositions strengthens the study's conceptual framework and demonstrates that achieving genuine inclusion requires not only policy reforms but also sustained institutional commitment to equitable educational practices, accessible learning environments, and holistic student support systems.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis of data collected from students and teachers in selected colleges of Thiruvananthapuram. The findings are interpreted in relation to the study objectives and theoretical framework, followed by practical suggestions and overall conclusions. The chapter aims to bridge empirical insights with policy and practice implications for strengthening inclusive education in higher education institutions.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Inclusion Existing as Policy Rather Than Practice

The findings indicate that although colleges have adopted policies and initiatives promoting inclusive education, participants perceived a noticeable gap between policy commitments and their implementation. Both students and teachers acknowledged that institutions have become increasingly aware of inclusion through policies, awareness programmes, committees, and institutional guidelines. However, these efforts were often viewed as inconsistent and insufficiently reflected in students' day-to-day academic experiences.

Participants emphasized that inclusive practices varied across departments and individual faculty members rather than being embedded within institutional systems. As a result, students' access to support frequently depended on personal initiative and the willingness of individual teachers instead of standardized institutional procedures. This inconsistency created unequal educational experiences, where some students felt adequately supported while others encountered barriers despite the existence of formal policies.

Student A reflected on this gap by stating,

"Inclusion is there... in theory... but... in practice... it is still not fully there."

Similarly, Teacher D observed,

"It depends... a lot on individual teachers... there isn't one common practice."

Teacher F also noted,

"Every department is different... some do more... others don't... so inclusion isn't really uniform."

These responses suggest that participants recognized institutional intentions to promote inclusion but questioned the consistency of implementation. While supportive practices were present, they were largely dependent on individual commitment rather than institutional mechanisms.

Another finding was that inclusion was often perceived as symbolic. Participants acknowledged the presence of committees, awareness programmes, and policy documents but felt these initiatives did not always lead to meaningful improvements in accessibility, participation, or support. Consequently, inclusion was viewed more as an institutional commitment on paper than a consistently experienced reality.

Overall, the findings suggest that higher education institutions are in a transitional stage where awareness of inclusive education has increased, but systematic implementation remains limited. The absence of standardized procedures and accountability mechanisms contributes to variability in practice, making students' experiences of inclusion largely dependent on context rather than guaranteed by institutional policy.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate a clear policy–practice gap in the implementation of inclusive education. Although institutions formally endorse principles of equity and inclusion, these principles have not been fully integrated into routine institutional practices. Instead, implementation remains fragmented and dependent on individual faculty members and departmental cultures.

These findings support Tristan McCowan's perspective that educational equity extends beyond access and requires meaningful participation and institutional responsiveness. They also align with the concept of performative institutionalism, where organizations demonstrate compliance through policies and committees without ensuring effective implementation. The findings further reinforce the need for stronger institutional accountability, standardized implementation frameworks, continuous monitoring, and capacity-building initiatives to translate inclusive policies into everyday educational practice.

Theme 2: Students Perceive Institutional Practices and Support Systems as Helpful but Inconsistently Accessible

The findings indicate that students acknowledged the efforts made by higher education institutions to promote inclusion through scholarships, mentoring, counselling services, faculty guidance, awareness programmes, and student welfare initiatives. These measures were generally viewed as positive steps toward creating an inclusive educational

environment. However, participants consistently reported that the availability of support did not always translate into effective access. The usefulness of institutional practices largely depended on their visibility, accessibility, responsiveness, and consistency in implementation.

Most participants explained that although formal support systems existed, they were often difficult to access or were not widely known among students. Consequently, many relied more on supportive faculty members, classmates, and friends than on formal institutional mechanisms. Students also highlighted that support services did not always address the diverse needs of marginalized groups, particularly those with identity-specific concerns.

Verbatim Evidence

Student A shared,

"The college does make efforts... there are programmes... policies... but when you actually need support... it doesn't always work the way you expect."

Student B explained,

"Most of the help I get... is from teachers and friends... I know there are support services... but many students don't even know how to reach them."

Student C stated,

"I haven't really seen... any visible support... for LGBTQ+ students... maybe something exists... but we don't know about it."

Teacher E observed,

"Support services are there... but resources are limited... staff, funding... even infrastructure... all of that affects implementation."

The verbatim responses suggest that students appreciated institutional intentions but experienced limitations in accessing available services. Teachers similarly recognized that institutional support was constrained by limited resources and implementation challenges.

Discussion

The findings indicate that institutional support systems contribute positively to inclusive education but remain limited by issues of accessibility, visibility, and institutional capacity. Students valued existing initiatives; however, many continued to rely on informal support networks because formal services were not consistently accessible or responsive.

These findings support the argument that inclusion requires more than the establishment of support mechanisms. Institutional services must be adequately resourced, clearly communicated, and responsive to the diverse needs of students to promote meaningful participation. The findings are consistent with the work of Afsina and Joseph (2024), who emphasize that effective inclusion depends on institutional readiness, stakeholder support, and adequate resources. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) argues that inclusive education extends beyond policy provision to ensuring that all learners can effectively access and benefit from available support systems.

Theme 3: Social and Cultural Backgrounds Significantly Shape Educational Experiences

The findings indicate that students' educational experiences are shaped by their social and cultural backgrounds. Participants described how factors such as socio-economic status, disability, sexuality, and family educational background influenced their participation, confidence, access to opportunities, and overall sense of belonging. Although higher education institutions provide equal admission opportunities, students reported that broader social inequalities continue to affect their educational experiences after enrolment.

Students from marginalized backgrounds explained that they often carried additional responsibilities and challenges that were not immediately visible within the academic environment. Financial constraints, lack of family guidance, concerns about identity disclosure, and previous life experiences influenced how they engaged with institutional opportunities and support systems.

Verbatim Evidence

Student A shared,

"People think... my disability is the biggest challenge... but honestly... it's the financial pressure... travelling... study materials... project expenses... all of that affects me every day."

Student B explained,

"I'm the first... in my family to study in college... my parents always support me... but they don't really know... how the system works... so I have to figure out most things myself."

Student C stated,

"I'm not completely open... about my sexuality... only a few people know... because... you never know... how others might react."

Teacher F observed,

"Students don't come here... with the same life experiences... their family background... financial situation... confidence... all of that shapes... how they participate in college."

The responses illustrate that students' experiences are influenced not only by institutional factors but also by their social identities and life circumstances. These differences affected students' confidence, participation, and ability to benefit equally from educational opportunities.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that educational experiences are closely linked to students' social and cultural backgrounds. Participants' accounts suggest that financial status, family educational history, disability, and identity continue to shape participation and engagement within higher education. These findings reinforce an intersectional understanding of inclusion, where multiple social identities interact to influence educational experiences.

The findings support Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, which explains that individuals experience overlapping forms of advantage and disadvantage rather than a single dimension of inequality. Similarly, McCowan (2016) argues that equitable higher education requires institutions to address structural inequalities that extend beyond access. The findings therefore suggest that inclusive educational practices should recognize students' diverse backgrounds and provide responsive support that acknowledges these differences rather than assuming all learners begin from similar social circumstances.

Theme 4: Academic and Social Participation is Influenced by Both Barriers and Facilitators

The findings indicate that students' participation in academic and social activities is influenced by both institutional barriers and supportive factors. Participants identified challenges such as inaccessible infrastructure, rigid teaching methods, financial constraints, and identity-related concerns that limited their engagement. At the same time, supportive faculty, peers, and flexible teaching practices encouraged greater participation and confidence.

Verbatim Evidence

Student A shared,

"Some buildings... are accessible... but not all... there are still places... I can't reach on my own."

Student B explained,

"Long lectures... are difficult for me... after a while... I lose focus."

Student C stated,

"It's easier to participate... when you feel comfortable... being yourself."

Student B added,

"Without my friends... college would have been much harder."

Teacher F observed,

"A supportive teacher... can completely change... a student's experience."

The responses suggest that while institutional barriers continue to affect participation, positive relationships with peers and teachers help students overcome many of these challenges.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that academic and social participation is shaped by the interaction of structural barriers and interpersonal support. Removing physical and pedagogical barriers alone is insufficient unless institutions also foster supportive relationships and inclusive learning environments. These findings align with Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018) and Student Engagement Theory (Kahu, 2013), which emphasize that meaningful participation requires both accessible environments and supportive educational practices.

Theme 5: Students' Sense of Belonging is Shaped by Acceptance, Recognition, and Participation

The findings reveal that students associated belonging with being accepted, respected, and actively included within the college community. Participants described belonging as developing through positive interactions with peers and teachers rather than simply being enrolled in the institution. Supportive relationships strengthened confidence and participation, whereas experiences of invisibility or misunderstanding weakened students' connection to the institution.

Verbatim Evidence

Student C shared,

"I feel connected... mostly when I'm with... close friends."

Student B explained,

"When teachers understand me... and don't judge me... I feel more confident."

Student A stated,

"Belonging... means being treated... like every other student."

Teacher F observed,

"Students feel they belong... when they're seen... heard... and respected."

These responses indicate that acceptance and recognition are central to developing a sense of belonging within higher education.

Discussion

The findings suggest that belonging is a key outcome of inclusive education. Students who feel accepted and valued are more likely to engage academically and socially, while limited recognition may contribute to isolation and reduced participation. Consistent with Strayhorn (2019), the findings indicate that a strong sense of belonging enhances engagement, persistence, and overall educational experiences. Creating inclusive institutional cultures that foster respect, recognition, and participation is therefore essential for meaningful inclusion.

Theme 6: Experiences of Invisibility and Marginalization Continue to Affect Student Well-Being

The findings indicate that although overt discrimination was rarely reported, many students experienced subtle forms of invisibility and marginalization. Participants described feeling overlooked, misunderstood, or insufficiently represented within the institutional environment. These experiences affected their confidence, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging. Students explained that exclusion often occurred through everyday interactions, stereotypes, limited awareness, and the absence of recognition for diverse identities and needs.

Verbatim Evidence

Student C shared,

"You can be... surrounded by people... and still feel invisible."

Student A stated,

"Sometimes... the campus feels like... it wasn't really designed... for students like me."

Student B explained,

"People think... I'm just lazy... because they don't understand ADHD... that's difficult."

Teacher F observed,

"Some students feel... they always have to prove themselves... before they're taken seriously."

These responses suggest that exclusion is often subtle but has a meaningful impact on students' emotional experiences and participation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that invisibility and marginalization remain important barriers to inclusion. Rather than occurring through direct discrimination, exclusion was often experienced through limited recognition, stereotypes, and lack of awareness. These findings support Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework and UNESCO (2020), which emphasize that meaningful inclusion requires recognition of diverse identities alongside equal access. Institutions must therefore address both structural and interpersonal barriers to promote students' well-being and belonging.

Theme 7: Inclusive Education Requires Systemic and Cultural Transformation

The findings reveal that participants viewed inclusion as more than the implementation of policies or support services. Both students and teachers emphasized that meaningful inclusion requires changes in institutional culture, everyday practices, and attitudes. Participants believed that while institutions have made progress, inclusion remained inconsistent because implementation often depended on individual departments and faculty members rather than a shared institutional approach.

Verbatim Evidence

Teacher D stated,

"Students' experiences... depend a lot... on the department... and the teachers."

Teacher E explained,

"Most colleges... want to be inclusive... but implementation... is still uneven."

Teacher F observed,

"Policies are important... but culture... is what really makes the difference."

Student C shared,

"Inclusion isn't just policies... it's feeling... accepted every day."

These responses indicate that participants viewed inclusion as an ongoing institutional process rather than a one-time initiative.

Discussion

The findings suggest that sustainable inclusion requires systemic and cultural transformation alongside policy implementation. Participants highlighted the need for consistent institutional practices, supportive leadership, and inclusive organizational cultures. These findings align with Ainscow (2020), who argues that inclusive education depends on institutional change rather than isolated interventions, and Booth and Ainscow (2011), who emphasize that inclusive cultures, policies, and practices must develop together. The findings therefore suggest that meaningful inclusion is achieved when institutions integrate equity and diversity into everyday academic and social life rather than relying solely on formal policies.

Theme 8: Students Rely on Informal Support Networks to Navigate Educational Challenges

The findings indicate that informal support networks play an important role in helping students manage academic, emotional, and social challenges. Although formal institutional support exists, participants reported that friends, classmates, and supportive faculty members often provided the most immediate and meaningful assistance. These relationships enhanced confidence, reduced stress, and encouraged continued participation.

Verbatim Evidence

Student B shared,

"Without my friends... managing college... would have been much harder."

Student A stated,

"My classmates... help with notes... moving around campus... little things... that really matter."

Student C explained,

"Just having... a few people... who understand you... makes a big difference."

Teacher D observed,

"Students usually go... to teachers they trust... before approaching... formal support systems."

The responses indicate that trusted relationships often compensate for limitations in institutional support and contribute significantly to students' academic and social engagement.

Discussion

The findings suggest that informal support networks function as important protective factors within higher education. While formal services remain essential, students frequently depend on trusted peers and faculty for immediate guidance and emotional support. These findings support Student Engagement Theory (Kahu, 2013), which emphasizes that positive relationships strengthen engagement and persistence. However, reliance on informal support also highlights the need to strengthen formal institutional support systems.

Theme 9: Students Demonstrate Resilience and Adaptive Coping Strategies

The findings reveal that students actively developed strategies to cope with educational challenges. Despite barriers related to disability, financial difficulties, identity concerns, and academic demands, participants described adapting their learning strategies and seeking support to remain engaged in higher education.

Verbatim Evidence

Student A shared,

"There are challenges... but I try... not to let them stop me."

Student B explained,

"I break tasks... into smaller steps... and use reminders... to stay organised."

Student C stated,

"You learn... who you can trust... and where you feel comfortable."

Teacher E observed,

"Many students... face difficulties... but they keep going... their resilience is remarkable."

These responses demonstrate that students actively employed adaptive strategies to overcome barriers and continue their education.

Discussion

The findings indicate that resilience supports students' continued participation despite structural and interpersonal challenges. However, resilience should not replace institutional responsibility. Consistent with the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990), institutions should reduce barriers rather than rely on students' ability to adapt. Inclusive education requires strengthening institutional systems alongside recognising students' resilience.

Theme 10: Institutional Accountability is Essential for Meaningful Inclusion

The findings indicate that participants viewed institutional accountability as fundamental to meaningful inclusion. Both students and teachers emphasized that inclusive education should not depend on individual faculty members or isolated initiatives but should be consistently embedded within institutional policies, practices, and culture.

Verbatim Evidence

Teacher D stated,

"A lot depends... on individual teachers... there isn't... one consistent approach."

Teacher E explained,

"Colleges want... to be inclusive... but implementation... still varies."

Teacher F observed,

"Policies matter... but culture... matters even more."

Student C shared,

"Inclusion isn't... just policies... it's feeling accepted... every day."

These responses suggest that participants evaluated inclusion based on everyday institutional experiences rather than policy statements alone.

Discussion

The findings highlight that meaningful inclusion requires institutional accountability, consistent implementation, and an inclusive organizational culture. Policies alone are insufficient unless supported by monitoring, adequate resources, and shared institutional commitment. These findings align with Booth and Ainscow (2011), who argue that inclusive education depends on the integration of inclusive cultures, policies, and practices. Institutions therefore need to move beyond symbolic commitments and establish systems that ensure equitable participation and belonging for all students.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of the study, it is evident that inclusive education in higher education institutions requires a comprehensive, systemic, and multi-dimensional approach. The following suggestions are proposed to address the identified policy–practice gaps and to strengthen inclusive practices in colleges of Thiruvananthapuram. These recommendations are grounded in the empirical findings and aligned with theoretical frameworks such as the Social Model of Disability, Intersectionality, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

1. Strengthening Policy Implementation Mechanisms

A major concern emerging from the study is the gap between policy formulation and its practical implementation. While inclusive policies exist, their execution lacks consistency, accountability, and institutional ownership. Therefore, there is a critical need to move towards structured implementation mechanisms that translate policy into actionable practice.

Institutions must develop clear operational guidelines that define roles, responsibilities, and expected outcomes related to inclusion. These guidelines should not remain abstract but must be integrated into everyday academic and administrative functioning. Establishing institutional inclusion committees with clearly defined mandates can serve as a central mechanism for coordination and monitoring. These committees should include representation from faculty, students, and administrative staff to ensure participatory governance.

Periodic audits of inclusive practices are essential to evaluate progress and identify gaps. Such audits should assess accessibility, pedagogy, student participation, and support systems. Additionally, inclusion indicators should be incorporated into institutional evaluation frameworks, accreditation processes, and performance reviews. This would ensure that inclusion becomes a measurable and accountable component of institutional functioning rather than a symbolic commitment.

2. Improving Physical and Digital Accessibility

The findings highlight that accessibility remains partial and fragmented, particularly affecting students with disabilities. Accessibility must be reframed as a fundamental right rather than an optional provision or compliance requirement.

Institutions should adopt a universal design approach to infrastructure, ensuring barrier-free campuses that include ramps, lifts, accessible washrooms, and inclusive classroom

layouts. Accessibility planning should be proactive and integrated into campus development rather than implemented retrospectively.

In addition to physical accessibility, digital inclusion is equally important in contemporary higher education. Institutions should provide assistive technologies such as screen readers, speech-to-text tools, and captioned learning materials. Recorded lectures and accessible digital content can significantly enhance participation for students with diverse learning needs.

Dedicated financial allocation is necessary to support accessibility initiatives, particularly in resource constrained and rural institutions. Without sustained funding, accessibility improvements remain sporadic and insufficient.

3. Promoting Inclusive Pedagogy and Flexible Learning

The persistence of rigid and standardized teaching practices calls for a shift toward inclusive pedagogy that recognizes learner diversity. Teaching–learning processes must be redesigned to accommodate different cognitive styles, learning paces, and engagement preferences.

Faculty should be encouraged to adopt differentiated instruction, blended learning models, and interactive teaching methods that promote active participation. The use of visual aids, discussions, case-based learning, and collaborative activities can enhance engagement across diverse student groups.

Flexibility in assessment is equally important. Institutions should allow alternative formats such as presentations, open-book assessments, and project-based evaluations. Flexible deadlines and continuous evaluation systems can help students manage academic requirements more effectively, particularly those with neuro-divergent conditions or socio-economic constraints.

Structured peer-learning environments, including guided group study and co-regulated learning strategies, can be particularly beneficial for students who require collaborative support. Such approaches align with inclusive education principles by shifting from uniformity to adaptability.

4. Capacity Building and Faculty Training

The study reveals significant gaps in faculty preparedness for inclusive education. Teachers often rely on personal experience rather than formal training, which limits the effectiveness of inclusive practices.

Regular capacity-building programs should be institutionalized to equip faculty with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Training should cover inclusive pedagogy, disability inclusion, neurodiversity, and classroom adaptation strategies.

In addition, sensitization programs focusing on intersectionality are essential. Faculty must be trained to understand how caste, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic background influence student experiences. This would enable them to adopt culturally responsive and context-sensitive teaching approaches.

Providing practical toolkits, guidelines, and resource materials can further support teachers in implementing inclusive strategies. Continuous professional development should be recognized as a core component of institutional quality enhancement.

5. Establishing Student Support Systems

The absence of structured support systems is a significant barrier to inclusive education. Institutions must develop comprehensive support mechanisms that address academic, psychological, and social needs.

Establishing counseling centers is crucial to support students facing stress, stigma, and identity-related challenges. Inclusive education resource units can provide specialized services such as academic assistance, disability support, and learning accommodations.

Peer support systems, including mentorship programs, can facilitate social integration and academic guidance. Senior students or trained peers can play a key role in supporting first-generation learners and marginalized students.

Academic support services such as remedial classes, tutoring, and skill development programs should be made accessible to students who require additional assistance. These interventions can enhance retention, engagement, and learning outcomes.

6. Enhancing Awareness and Sensitization

The findings indicate low levels of awareness regarding inclusive education among both students and faculty. Addressing this requires systematic sensitization efforts to challenge stigma, stereotypes, and discriminatory attitudes.

Institutions should conduct regular awareness programs on diversity, inclusion, mental health, and social justice. Workshops, seminars, and campaigns can help create a more informed and inclusive campus culture.

Integrating topics related to gender, sexuality, disability, and social inequality into the curriculum can further promote critical understanding and empathy. Such curricular inclusion ensures that diversity is recognized as a legitimate area of academic inquiry.

Student-led initiatives, including clubs and advocacy groups, can play an important role in promoting inclusion. Encouraging active student participation in awareness activities fosters ownership and collective responsibility.

7. Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces

The absence of safe spaces for marginalized identities is a critical concern identified in the study. Institutions must ensure that all students have access to environments where they can express themselves without fear of discrimination or judgment.

Establishing inclusive student forums and identity-based support groups can provide spaces for dialogue, expression, and mutual support. Gender-neutral facilities and inclusive policies further contribute to creating a safe campus environment.

Institutions should also develop clear and accessible mechanisms for reporting discrimination, harassment, and bullying. These mechanisms must ensure confidentiality, fairness, and timely resolution to build trust among students.

Encouraging student organizations that represent diverse identities can enhance visibility and representation, thereby fostering a sense of belonging.

8. Addressing Socio-Economic Barriers

Socio-economic disadvantage significantly affects student participation and academic outcomes. Addressing financial barriers is essential for achieving equitable access and inclusion.

Scholarship systems should be strengthened to ensure timely disbursement and simplified application procedures. Delays and bureaucratic complexities often discourage students from accessing financial support.

Institutions should provide subsidized learning materials, transportation support, and access to digital resources. Ensuring digital inclusion is particularly important in the context of increasing reliance on online learning platforms.

Emergency financial assistance and contingency support systems can help students cope with unexpected challenges. Such measures are particularly important for students from vulnerable backgrounds.

9. Institutionalizing Inclusive Practices

A key recommendation is to move from individual-driven efforts to institutionalized practices. Inclusion should be embedded within the core functioning of institutions rather than dependent on isolated initiatives.

Institutions should integrate inclusion into their vision, mission, and policy frameworks, ensuring that it becomes a guiding principle for decision-making. Interdisciplinary collaboration can further strengthen inclusive education initiatives by bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise.

Developing robust data systems is essential for monitoring inclusion. Institutions should track student participation, retention, and outcomes across different social categories to identify disparities and inform interventions.

Institutionalization ensures sustainability, consistency, and accountability in implementing inclusive education.

10. Strengthening Rural–Urban Equity

The study highlights disparities between urban and rural institutions in terms of resources, infrastructure, and support systems. Addressing these disparities is critical for ensuring equitable access to inclusive education.

Increased funding and targeted resource allocation are necessary to support rural colleges. Investment in infrastructure, technology, and faculty development can help bridge the gap between institutions.

Specialized training programs should be designed for faculty in rural settings, focusing on context-specific challenges and solutions.

Collaborative partnerships between urban and rural institutions can facilitate knowledge sharing, resource exchange, and capacity building. Outreach programs can further enhance access and inclusion for students from rural backgrounds.

Overall Implication of Suggestions

The proposed suggestions emphasize that inclusive education requires a holistic and systemic approach that addresses structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural dimensions. Moving beyond symbolic inclusion to transformative practice necessitates institutional commitment, resource allocation, capacity building, and continuous monitoring.

By implementing these recommendations, higher education institutions in Thiruvananthapuram can create more equitable, accessible, and inclusive learning environments that support diverse student populations and enhance overall educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The present study on “*Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Higher Education: Perspectives from Colleges in Thiruvananthapuram*” understanding of how inclusion is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced within colleges in Thiruvananthapuram. Grounded in qualitative inquiry and supported by intersectional and inclusive education frameworks, the study reveals that inclusion within higher education institutions is characterized by a significant disjunction between formal commitments and lived realities. While institutional policies reflect progressive intentions aligned with equity, access, and social justice, their translation into everyday academic and administrative practices remains partial, inconsistent, and contingent upon localized conditions.

At a structural level, the study demonstrates that inclusive education is not yet fully institutionalized within higher education systems. Instead, it operates within a framework of fragmented implementation, where practices vary across institutions, departments, and individual actors. This variability reflects the absence of standardized operational mechanisms, monitoring systems, and accountability structures. Consequently, inclusion is often reduced to a symbolic or compliance-based exercise rather than a transformative institutional process. The persistence of this policy–practice gap indicates that inclusion has not been embedded into the core functioning of higher education institutions but remains peripheral to mainstream academic practices.

The findings further highlight the critical role of structural and infrastructural barriers in shaping students’ access and participation. Despite policy mandates emphasizing accessibility, the physical and institutional environment continues to pose significant challenges, particularly for students with disabilities. Infrastructural provisions such as ramps, lifts, and accessible facilities are inconsistently available, reflecting a fragmented approach to accessibility. This indicates that accessibility is often treated as an additional requirement rather than an integral component of institutional design and planning. From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, such barriers are not merely logistical limitations but represent systemic exclusion embedded within the educational environment.

In addition to physical infrastructure, the study identifies resource constraints as a major barrier to inclusion. The absence of specialized support systems, such as counseling services, assistive technologies, and resource centers, limits the ability of institutions to address diverse student needs effectively. These limitations are particularly pronounced in rural colleges, where resource scarcity exacerbates existing inequalities. The rural–urban divide thus emerges as a significant dimension of inequity, reflecting broader structural disparities within the higher education system.

Pedagogical practices constitute another critical area where the policy–practice gap is evident. The study reveals that teaching and assessment methods remain largely standardized, adhering to a “one-size-fitsall” model that does not accommodate learner diversity. This rigidity disproportionately affects students with neurodivergent conditions, first-generation learners, and those from marginalized socio-cultural backgrounds. The lack of flexible pedagogical strategies, alternative assessment methods, and differentiated instruction undermines the principles of inclusive education and limits meaningful engagement.

From the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), inclusive pedagogy requires adaptability, multiple modes of engagement, and responsiveness to diverse learning needs. However, the findings indicate that such approaches are not systematically integrated into classroom practices. Instead, teachers often operate within structural constraints, such as large class sizes and limited training, which restrict their ability to implement inclusive strategies. This highlights the need for systemic pedagogical transformation rather than isolated adaptations.

A significant contribution of the study lies in its identification of the intersectional nature of exclusion within higher education. Students’ experiences are shaped by the interaction of multiple identity markers, including caste, class, disability, gender, and sexuality. These intersecting identities produce layered forms of marginalization that extend beyond academic barriers to include psychosocial and cultural dimensions. For instance, students from marginalized caste backgrounds may experience subtle exclusion in classroom participation, while queer students may face challenges related to identity expression and acceptance. Similarly, students with disabilities from economically disadvantaged backgrounds encounter compounded barriers that affect both access and engagement.

This intersectional perspective underscores that inclusion cannot be addressed through single-axis interventions. Instead, it requires a holistic approach that recognizes the complexity of student identities and the structural inequalities embedded within educational institutions. The persistence of subtle discrimination, micro-aggressions, and exclusionary attitudes further highlights the cultural dimensions of marginalization. While overt forms of discrimination have reduced over time, more nuanced and indirect forms continue to shape students’ experiences, often remaining unaddressed within institutional frameworks.

The absence of safe and inclusive spaces emerges as a critical concern, particularly for students belonging to marginalized identity groups. The lack of institutional mechanisms for identity affirmation, peer support, and grievance redressal contributes to feelings of isolation and vulnerability. This indicates that inclusion must extend beyond access and participation to encompass psychosocial well-being and a sense of belonging.

Another key finding of the study is the limited awareness and institutional capacity to implement inclusive education effectively. Both students and teachers demonstrate gaps in understanding inclusive policies, particularly in relation to neurodiversity, learning disabilities, and intersectional inclusion. Faculty members often lack formal training and rely on experiential knowledge, which may not adequately address diverse student needs. This reflects a systemic gap in capacity-building and professional development within higher education institutions.

The absence of structured support systems further reinforces the policy–practice gap. While mechanisms such as scholarships, counseling services, and inclusion committees may exist in some form, their accessibility, effectiveness, and visibility remain limited. Students often face challenges in navigating institutional processes, accessing support, and receiving timely assistance. This indicates a lack of coordination and integration within institutional systems, which undermines the effectiveness of existing provisions.

Socio-economic factors emerge as a significant determinant of educational participation and outcomes. Students from low-income backgrounds face multiple challenges, including financial constraints, limited access to academic resources, and reduced opportunities for supplementary learning. These barriers not only affect academic performance but also influence students' confidence, motivation, and overall engagement. The intersection of socio-economic disadvantage with other identity markers further intensifies exclusion, highlighting the need for targeted interventions.

Despite these systemic challenges, the study also reveals important dimensions of resilience and agency among students. Students demonstrate adaptive coping strategies, including peer collaboration, selfregulation techniques, and persistence in the face of adversity. This aspirational resilience reflects a strong commitment to education as a pathway for social mobility and personal development. However, the reliance on individual coping mechanisms also indicates the absence of adequate institutional support, placing the burden of adaptation on students rather than the system.

Similarly, teachers exhibit a degree of commitment to inclusive values, often adopting informal and relational approaches to support students. Strategies such as rapport-building, flexible communication, and individualized attention reflect efforts to bridge institutional gaps. However, these practices remain dependent on individual initiative and are not supported by formal structures or policies. This reinforces the need to shift from individualized efforts to institutionalized systems of support.

The study also highlights the importance of accountability and governance in promoting inclusive education. The absence of monitoring mechanisms, evaluation frameworks, and performance indicators contributes to the persistence of policy–practice gaps. Without accountability, inclusive policies remain aspirational rather than operational. Institutional

commitment must therefore be accompanied by mechanisms for tracking progress, evaluating outcomes, and ensuring compliance.

In synthesizing these findings, it becomes evident that inclusive higher education requires a paradigm shift from symbolic inclusion to transformative practice. Inclusion must be understood not as a static policy objective but as a dynamic and continuous process that involves structural, pedagogical, and cultural change. This transformation requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels, including policy formulation, institutional governance, faculty development, and student engagement.

From a policy perspective, there is a need to strengthen implementation frameworks, ensuring that inclusive education is supported by clear guidelines, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms.

At the institutional level, inclusion must be integrated into strategic planning, infrastructure development, and academic processes. Faculty development programs should be prioritized to enhance pedagogical competence and sensitivity to diversity.

At the socio-cultural level, efforts must be made to challenge stigma, promote awareness, and foster inclusive campus environments. Creating safe spaces, encouraging dialogue, and supporting student-led initiatives can contribute to a more inclusive institutional culture. Addressing socio-economic barriers through financial support, scholarships, and resource provision is also essential for ensuring equitable access and participation.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes that inclusive higher education in Thiruvananthapuram is at a transitional stage, characterized by progressive policy frameworks but limited practical realization. Bridging the policy–practice gap requires a comprehensive, intersectional, and systemic approach that addresses both structural and experiential dimensions of inclusion. By moving beyond fragmented and symbolic practices toward sustained institutional commitment, higher education institutions can create environments that not only accommodate diversity but actively value and promote it.

Such transformation is essential not only for improving student engagement and learning outcomes but also for advancing the broader goals of social justice, equity, and democratic participation within education.

Annexure

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Title of the Study

Policy–Practice Gaps in Inclusive Higher Education: Perspectives from Colleges in Thiruvananthapuram

Interview Guide

Theme 1: Educational Journey and College Experience

Guiding Questions

- Tell me about your experience as a student in this college.
- How has your journey in higher education been so far?
- What has been your overall experience inside the college?

Possible Probes

- Could you explain that further?
- Can you share an example?
- How did you feel in that situation?

Theme 2: Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

Guiding Questions

- Have you experienced situations where you felt included within the college?
- Have you experienced situations where you felt excluded or treated differently?
- What contributed to those experiences?

Possible Probes

- Who was involved?

- What happened afterwards?
- How did it affect you academically or personally?

Theme 3: Institutional Practices and Support

Guiding Questions

- What support does your college provide to students?
- Have you used any institutional support services?
- How helpful were these services?

Possible Probes

- Was the support easy to access?
- What challenges did you face?
- What improvements would you suggest?

Theme 4: Influence of Social and Cultural Background

Guiding Questions

- Do you think your personal background has influenced your college experience?
- In what ways has your identity shaped your participation or opportunities?

Possible Probes

- Financial background
- Family educational background
- Disability
- Gender
- Sexuality
- Language
- Religion

- Caste

Theme 5: Academic and Social Participation

Guiding Questions

- What factors encourage your participation in class and campus activities?
- What factors make participation difficult?

Possible Probes

- Teaching methods
- Peer relationships
- Faculty support
- Infrastructure
- Confidence

Theme 6: Sense of Belonging

Guiding Questions

- Do you feel that you belong in your college?
- What makes you feel accepted or respected?

Possible Probes

- Relationships with teachers
- Friendships
- Department culture
- Campus environment

Theme 7: Suggestions

Guiding Questions

- What changes would make your college more inclusive?

- What recommendations would you give to the institution?

Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to share?
- Thank the participant for their valuable time and contribution.

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FACULTY MEMBERS

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon.

I am conducting a study on inclusive higher education as part of my Master of Social Work programme. The purpose of this interview is to understand faculty perspectives regarding inclusive education and institutional practices.

Your participation is voluntary, and all responses will remain confidential.

Interview Guide

Theme 1: Understanding Inclusive Education

Guiding Questions

- What does inclusive education mean to you?
- How do you understand inclusion within higher education?

Theme 2: Institutional Policies and Practices

Guiding Questions

- What inclusive policies or practices exist in your institution?
- How are these implemented?

Possible Probes

- Equal Opportunity Cell
- Disability support
- Scholarships

- Student mentoring
- Counselling

Theme 3: Student Diversity

Guiding Questions

- What types of diversity do you observe among students?
- Which groups require additional support?

Theme 4: Barriers to Inclusion

Guiding Questions

- What barriers prevent effective inclusion?
- What challenges do faculty encounter while implementing inclusive practices?

Possible Probes

- Infrastructure
- Resources
- Faculty training
- Institutional policies
- Student attitudes

Theme 5: Inclusive Teaching Practices

Guiding Questions

- How do you accommodate diverse learning needs?
- How do you encourage participation from all students?

Theme 6: Student Engagement and Belonging

Guiding Questions

- What factors influence students' engagement?
- What helps students develop a sense of belonging?

Theme 7: Recommendations

Guiding Questions

- What changes are needed to strengthen inclusive education?
- What role should institutions play in reducing policy–practice gaps?

General Probing Questions (Applicable to Both Interviews)

Use these probes whenever further clarification is required.

- Could you explain that in more detail?
- Can you tell me more about that experience?
- What happened next?
- How did that make you feel?
- Why do you think that happened?
- Could you give an example?
- How did you respond?
- What support was available?
- What could have been done differently?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Table A.1 Alignment with the Study

Theme	Research Question Addressed
Educational journey	Contextual understanding
Experiences of inclusion and exclusion	RQ1
Institutional practices and support	RQ2
Social and cultural background	RQ3
Academic and social participation	RQ4
Sense of belonging	RQ5

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