

SCALING SYSTEMIC INCLUSION: THE PERKINS INDIA MODEL PROGRAM AS A STRATEGY FOR TRANSFORMING MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Children with disabilities in India continue to be excluded from education, with over 27% never attending school and from those who attended, a staggering 12% dropped out (Reddy, 2022; Livewire, 2022). Addressing this gap requires scalable, systemic solutions to empower schools, equip educators, and eliminate social barriers for children with disabilities. This paper presents the Perkins India Model School Program, launched under Project Prayaas in 2023, as a scalable framework for inclusive education embedded within existing school systems (Gleason, Hudson, & Jacobs, 2024; Gloria, Maria 2023 – Perkins School for the Blind). This exploratory paper offers early evidence of potential for transformation on a systemic level while discussing implications for sustainability and further research.

Keywords: Disability, Model School Program, Perkins India, Project Prayaas, Inclusive Education, Systemic Solutions

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is the foundation for an inclusive society, “inclusive education involves a process that contributes to the goal of social inclusion.” (UNESCO 2020). Despite international progress toward this goal, at least 50 percent of all young people with disabilities living in low- and middle-income countries are excluded from education; in some contexts, the figure is closer to 90 percent (World Bank, 2025). In India, approximately 61% of children with disabilities aged 5–19 are enrolled in school, compared to 71% of the general child population (UNESCO, SER, 2019). The disparity is attributed to inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and lack of inclusive pedagogies (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Although India has progressive policies, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and the National Education Policy (2020), persistent issues like insufficient infrastructure, dearth of trained special educators, and inadequate teacher training lead to significant implementation gaps (Pancholi & Maurya, 2023; Sadana & Singh, 2023).

The Perkins India Model Program, part of Project Prayaas, aims to integrate inclusive practices into mainstream schools by transforming them into inclusive centers of excellence. This paper explores the design, implementation, and early outcomes of this initiative, contributing to the global conversation about scaling inclusive education systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The push for inclusive education has gained renewed urgency in recent years, with growing consensus around the need for systemic, scalable approaches rather than fragmented or pilot-driven efforts (UNESCO, 2020). The Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020) identifies system-wide transformation as central to equitable and quality education, advocating for inclusive principles to be embedded from policy to classroom practice, including community and family engagement.

Contemporary models of scalable inclusion emphasize the importance of working within existing educational structures to enable lasting change. Successful models move beyond tokenistic integration and are built around structured processes of transformation, involving school-wide self-assessment, action planning, and capacity-building cycles (Hudson et al., 2024) (Ainscow, 2020). These structured processes are essential to ensuring that inclusion is not dependent on individual leadership but institutionalized through culture and systems.

A key driver of such transformation is the use of clear benchmarks for inclusive quality enabling schools to assess their positioning on the journey to inclusion and identify areas for growth (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023). Another core component of scalable frameworks is the establishment of embedded monitoring systems. These systems track progress on inclusive practices, student participation, and learning outcomes through data that informs decision-making at multiple levels; from school leaders to policymakers (Perkins School for the Blind, 2023).

Research further underscores the need for school-based teacher training that is reflective, iterative, and context-specific (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). Finally, inclusive education can only be sustained when schools evolve into centers of excellence that promote equity and participation for all learners. This shift requires alignment across policy, pedagogy, leadership, and community partnerships, and is most successful when inclusive values are deeply rooted in everyday school

practices (Ainscow, 2020).

Singal (2019) critiques the gap between policy and practice in India, where infrastructure and teacher training are insufficient to meet the needs of children with disabilities, particularly those with complex conditions. This paper responds to the need for scalable, context-specific solutions in the Indian setting.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts an exploratory case study methodology to understand how the Perkins India Model Program was implemented in a mainstream school setting under Project Prayaas. A case study approach was selected not just for its ability to document processes, but because it allows us to foreground context, lived experiences, and the dynamic nature of systemic change. The case presented in this paper was not chosen solely for performance indicators but also because of its willingness to engage with the inclusion process from an early stage.

Data was collected from multiple sources: Internal records from the implementation phase, baseline assessments using the Perkins Quality Assessment Process, Observational insights, training reports, interviews with school administrators, educators, caregivers, parents and reflective notes shared by teachers and facilitators.

Rather than forcing a rigid structure, we organized insights organically around the seven domains of the Perkins Quality Assessment Process. This allowed us to trace how changes emerged within the school ecosystem and to identify both innovative practices and areas of improvement.

While the study is limited to a single school, it offers insights into how inclusive education can be embedded in mainstream systems using existing resources. Data analysis focused on tracking changes in enrollment, teacher training, and the integration of inclusive education practices over time. Ethical consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Program Design

The Model Program is structured around a four-step cycle:

1. Baseline Assessment using over 100 indicators from the Perkins Quality Assessment Process
2. Co-designed Action Planning with school teams
3. Capacity Building via Perkins International Academy and local mentoring
4. Annual Endline Assessment to monitor progress and adjust plans

Baseline Assessment

Our approach relies on data, so the first thing is a baseline, from where to start from and evaluate future progress. This is measured through the Perkins Quality Assessment Process, which uses 100+ indicators of inclusive education practices, categorized into seven domain areas:

- Knowledge about the student: Formal and non-formal assessments of the student are implemented and tracked regularly so teachers can respond to inclusive teaching methods.

- Plans, activities and content: Teachers implement a child-centered approach, in which educational practices are individualized, flexible, respectful of, and responsive to each student.
- Organization of the educational environment: Adapted and accessible environments and materials are in place to maximize learning.
- Program management: Program administration promotes the allocation of resources and supports children's right to education and teachers' professional development. A culture of inclusion is established in the school, in which patterns of shared behaviour and beliefs ensure that children with disabilities are valued, respected, and included.
- Staff engagement: Teachers' specialized knowledge for addressing children's needs through collaborative work and family engagement.
- Student engagement: Learners with disabilities have access to the school curriculum (academic and functional) on an equal basis with others.
- Family support: Families are included, supported, and empowered as partners in the education of their children.

Codesigned Action Planning

To support the transition from self-assessment to structured implementation, each model school develops a detailed Action Plan anchored in the findings of the Perkins Quality Assessment Process. The Action Plan serves as a bridge between diagnostic insight and practical change, allowing schools to prioritize goals, articulate activities, and track progress in a time-bound manner.

Each goal in the Action Plan includes a clear outcome statement, a set of activities, a timeline, responsible persons, and expected documentation or evidence.

Capacity Building

Following the assessment of a school's capacity and areas for quality improvement, a training and mentoring program is designed and delivered. This includes the Perkins International Academy, a three-part standard curriculum centred on the diversity and life experiences of a child with disabilities, with a focus on developing the skills practitioners need to include these children in health and education services. Participants learn how to establish communication with students, create appropriate learning environments, and build relationships that become the basis of all learning and development.

Perkins experts deliver tailor-made training and three levels of coursework: Foundation, Advanced, and Program Development, with a combination of online and in person elements. Each module supports participants to progress from basic to advanced understanding of children with multiple disabilities as described in Table 1. Eventually, participants learn to develop programs and build transdisciplinary teams to implement them. Some participants progress to a fourth and final level of training, which equips them to share effective practices with others through providing mentoring and training.

Table 1:

	Foundation	Advanced	Program Development
Module 1	Learners with Visual Impairment and Multiple Disabilities	Planning intervention based on the need of individual children with Multiple Disabilities and vision loss or deafblindness	Creating a dynamic learning environment
Module 2	Communication and language development	Conversation, relationships, and augmentative communication	Specialized content for Learners with Multiple Disabilities
Module 3	Assessment: the basis for individual program planning	From assessment to quality learning opportunities	Providing positive behavior support
Module 4	Developing meaningful curriculum	Creating meaningful curriculum	Team collaboration, mentorship and self-evaluation

Annual Endline Assessment

The final step in the Model Program cycle involves an Annual Endline Assessment using the Perkins Quality Assessment Process to evaluate the school's progress against the original baseline and the goals defined in the Action Plan. This assessment is not limited to measuring outcomes; it is designed to generate reflective, evidence-based dialogue among school stakeholders—teachers, administrators, and families—about what has changed, what is working, and what needs further attention. The endline uses the same quality indicators applied during the baseline, allowing for comparative analysis across all seven domains of inclusion.

The results of the endline are used to collaboratively revise school priorities, refresh training plans, and realign goals for the next cycle of improvement. For instance, if the assessment reveals improvements in family engagement but limited gains in individualized program planning, the school can shift focus to capacity-building in that area. This cyclical model ensures that inclusive practices are not static or checklist-driven, but dynamic and evolving based on data and experience. The Annual Endline Assessment thus serves as both a measurement tool and a strategic planning mechanism, reinforcing accountability while embedding a culture of continuous improvement.

Case Study: Piramal Foundation School, Rajasthan Context and School Selection:

The Piramal Foundation School was selected under Model Program due to its deep community integration and demonstrated commitment to equitable education. With over 1.1 million children reached in the last 16 years, and a team of 5,000+ employees across 27 states and 2 Union Territories, the Piramal Foundation's nationwide infrastructure and legacy of grassroots engagement and leadership development through prestigious fellowships made it an ideal context for demonstrating system-level change.

Assessment Using the Perkins Quality Assessment Process:

The transformation began with a baseline assessment using the Perkins Quality Assessment Process, a tool aligned to more than 100 global benchmarks of inclusive education. This tool allowed for systematic identification of both strengths and priority areas. While leadership support and community rapport were evident, the data highlighted gaps in teacher knowledge of diverse learners, limited family engagement, and lack of individualized program planning.

Action Planning:

At the Piramal Foundation model school, the Action Plan was co-created with input from teachers, school leadership, special educators, Gandhi Fellows, and parent representatives. This participatory process ensured that goals were both responsive to the data and contextually grounded.

The plan prioritized three key domains; each directly linked to the Perkins Quality Assessment Process-

1. Strengthening teacher understanding of student needs through Student Profiles
2. Embedding home visits, structured Parent Teacher Meetings, and parent networks to deepen family participation
3. Improving the quality of Individualized Education Programs

Progress against these activities was monitored through a cycle of weekly team meetings, informal check-ins, and reflection sessions. This iterative review process allowed for modifications based on real-time feedback, for example, shifting parent meetings from general sessions to group-specific and individualized interactions based on engagement levels.

The Action Plan also helped surface implementation challenges, such as inconsistency in home visit practices or delays in quarterly evaluations. These gaps were used constructively to inform the next planning cycle. Importantly, the tool fostered a culture of collective accountability and created a visible roadmap for school-wide transformation toward inclusion.

In this way, the Action Plan functioned not merely as a checklist but as a dynamic planning and reflection tool, embedded within the model program's broader framework of data-driven and context-responsive change.

Capacity Building:

Teachers engaged in structured training via the Perkins International Academy, aligned with evidence that in-service teachers can and should be supported via professional development to improve their implementation of inclusive education. (Donath et al.2023). The Piramal school program is at the Foundation Module level of the Perkins International Academy training. Weekly collaborative sessions between general and special educators supported reflective practice and shared problem-solving.

"I have been working here for 14 years, and the collaboration with Perkins has significantly transformed our approach and understanding of working with children with special needs. Our perspectives have deepened, enabling us to better support these children. Every Wednesday, we hold dedicated meetings with special educators to discuss each child's needs, behaviour and social development. Together, we develop action plans to address challenges. These regular conversations have fostered a shared understanding and enabled us to collaboratively create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment."

- Mamta Pareek, Teacher, Seth Piramal Secondary School, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan

Implementation in Progress:

The program is mid-implementation but has already catalyzed noticeable change:

- A 100% increase in interest-based, student-centered Individualized Educational Plans
- A 44% increase in enrollment of children with disabilities
- A structured Educational implementation plan and home visit calendar now integrated into the school system
- Formation of three parent networking groups

Community inclusion was reinforced through the involvement of Gandhi Fellows, non-teaching youth leaders trained in inclusive practices. Through street plays, workshops, and community-

invited events, they raised disability awareness and fostered local ownership.

Outcomes and Next Steps:

Though still in progress, midline tracking showed early gains in inclusive pedagogy, student autonomy, and family-school collaboration. Inspired by this success, six neighboring government schools expressed interest in replicating the model.

This case illustrates how a structured process of transformation, supported by clear benchmarks, embedded monitoring, and a whole-community approach (Gleason, Hudson, & Jacobs, 2024), can convert the vision of inclusive education into sustained and scalable practice.

DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of the Perkins India Model Program illustrates that systemic inclusion is not only aspirational but operationally achievable when supported by a structured framework. The use of the Perkins Quality Assessment Process enabled schools to self-assess and identify areas for growth across over 100 benchmarks. In the case of the Piramal Foundation School, this led to embedded changes in teaching structures, including the formal adoption of student profiles, interest-based individualized educational plans, and a system-wide implementation plan for tailored education needs and home visit calendar. These practices reoriented the school's planning processes to center on the individual needs of children with disabilities, while simultaneously benefiting the broader school ecosystem. Efficient use of internal resources such as weekly teacher collaboration meetings, capacity building through Perkins International Academy modules, and the mobilization of Gandhi Fellows for community engagement further demonstrates that scale does not require parallel systems but rather deeper alignment with existing ones.

While promising, the model surfaced critical areas for future focus. These include the need for third-party validation to enhance credibility, more consistent alignment with evolving state-level policies, and differentiated support to address capacity gaps across teacher cohorts. Many of these gaps have informed the design of follow-up interventions currently in development, including policy dialogues and a pilot for decentralized mentoring models.

Conclusions

Early evidence from the Perkins India Model Program suggests that inclusive education can be scaled through whole-school transformation embedded within existing systems. By shifting inclusive practices from project-level innovation to institutional practice, the model advances the broader goals of equity, social justice, and SDG 4. However, sustained outcomes will depend on long-term investment in school-level capacity, supportive policy frameworks, and robust mechanisms for accountability and learning.

Some countries in Latin America and Asia have successfully implemented the Change Model and have showcased tremendous results and transformation. In the case of a school in Mendoza, Argentina, a state-managed special education school serving as a regional school primarily for students from the San Martín Area offers specialized classes in visual arts, music, and psychomotor activities. In addition to its students, the school provides support to ninety

students who are part of inclusive education processes. Through the Change Model, the school has seen increased use of inclusive activities with various supports, including multimedia resources, devices for augmentative and alternative communication, and calendars. Families have begun to re-engage in their children's learning processes while teachers are considering person-centered planning for some students, recognizing the need for increased collaboration with families and a deeper understanding of the student (Gleason, D., Hudson, L., & Jacobs, L. (2024).

Recommendations

- Embed inclusive planning into school systems by institutionalizing tools such as interest-based Individualized Educational Plans and home visit schedules within the academic calendar. This ensures equity-driven practices are not parallel interventions but integrated into school functioning, as seen in the Piramal Foundation School model.
- Scale the Perkins Quality Assessment Process through state-level adaptation and policy alignment, enabling schools to assess inclusion through measurable benchmarks and structured transformation cycles. Its success in guiding data-driven action planning demonstrates its potential as a scalable governance tool.
- Develop distributed mentorship systems by investing in in-school and local mentors trained in inclusive education. Building capacity through peer learning, reflective practice, and job-embedded coaching, as done via Perkins International Academy and teacher collaborations to ensure long-term sustainability without reliance on external experts.
- Leverage local human resources for community engagement, drawing on existing cadres (e.g., fellows, volunteers, teacher educators, or school management committees) to promote inclusion. While Gandhi Fellows were effective in this pilot, states can adapt by training equivalent local actors to raise awareness and strengthen school-community ties.
- Align longitudinal tracking and third-party validation mechanisms with the Perkins Quality Assessment Process, ensuring that changes in inclusion are systematically measured across key benchmarks such as student participation, autonomy, and learning outcomes. This will support accountability, inform continuous improvement, and strengthen advocacy for scale.

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