

*Original Research Article*

# Strategies for Fostering Inclusive Early Childhood Education for Children with Communication Disorders

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Education fundamentally involves acquiring valuable knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions. With over 85% of brain development occurring by the age six, appropriate care and stimulation during these years are essential. Inclusive early childhood education ensures equitable learning opportunities for all children, including those with communication disorders. Special educators, rehabilitation professionals, and parents are crucial in empowering and supporting these children. Hence, the researcher aims to study the strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders.

**Method:** A descriptive survey method was used, using the 'Inclusive Education Strategies Test' developed by the researcher to assess these strategies. One seventy-thirty rehab professionals working in the special education field were selected using snowball sampling techniques, and data were collected via Google Forms: percentage, mean scores, and one-way ANOVA were used for analyzing the data.

**Results:** The study revealed that early intervention, professional training, and effective inclusive teaching practices are essential for supporting children with communication disorders. The significant impact of multidisciplinary collaboration and field expertise emphasizes the need for targeted professional development and resource allocation to enhance educational outcomes.

**Conclusion:** The study underscores the necessity of continuous professional development for educators and therapists to ensure they be updated with the most current knowledge and skills to effectively support children with communication disorders. It also highlights the need for increased funding and resources to address the challenges identified, such as inadequate assistive technology and insufficient training opportunities.

**Keywords:** Strategies, Fostering, Inclusive Early Childhood Education, Children with Communication Disorder.

## INTRODUCTION

Investing in education is pivotal for holistic national development, particularly in a diverse and populous country like India. Recognizing the significance of inclusive

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education, India has made substantial progress in enhancing educational access for individuals with disabilities. This is achieved through various institutions, including special schools, mainstream schools, and inclusive schools. As per Census 2011, India has 26.8 million PwDs, constituting 2.21% of the total population. Of these, 15 million (55.89%) are men, and 11.8 million (44.11%) are women. The term "Divyangjan" encompasses individuals with diverse disabilities, such as impairments in hearing, speech, mobility, vision, mental health, intellectual abilities, cerebral palsy, and multiple disabilities. As per the UDISE 2020-21, India manages over 1.489 million schools, employs 9.507 million teachers, and educates 265.2 crore children. Among these students, 1,841,997 children with disabilities are enrolled in primary schools and 398,361 in secondary schools.

India's progressive legislation and policies form the backbone of its inclusive education framework. The Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 mandates access to inclusive neighbourhood schools for CwDs. The Right of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016 reinforces principles of non-discrimination, zero rejection, and reasonable accommodations. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 further builds on these foundations, aligning with SDG-4 aims to "guarantee inclusive and equitable quality education while promoting continuous educational opportunities for everyone by 2030."

Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJ&E) initiated the establishment of Cross Disability Early Intervention Centers (CDEIC) for children from birth to 6 years of age. This initiative comprehensively addresses the needs arising from various disabilities. On June 17, 2021, the DEPwD launched 14 CDEICs designed to screen and intervene for all 21 categories of disabilities recognized under the RPwD Act, 2016. These centres offer: (i) screening of children and identification of at-risk cases, (ii) therapeutic services including speech, occupational, and physiotherapy, (iii) counselling for parents and peer counselling, and (iv) preparatory school facilities to help children with disabilities become school-ready.

Inclusive classrooms in early childhood education offer substantial benefits for children with communication disorders and their peers. Rather than segregating children for specialized instruction, special education teachers integrate their support within the classroom. This approach allows all students to learn together, with teachers receiving the necessary assistance and support (Lathan, J. 2018). Such classrooms emphasize abilities rather than disabilities, encouraging teachers to broaden their skills and connect with each student individually. Inclusive early childhood classrooms foster an environment where every pupil's needs are honoured, diverse cultures and perspectives are valued, diversity and individuality are celebrated, and shared respect and empathy are nurtured, creating a supportive and enriching learning environment for every child (ASER 2020).

Early identification and intervention for young children with disabilities yield significant long-term benefits. Evidence suggests that early intervention can have lifelong positive outcomes, helping to overcome barriers posed by disability, reduce developmental delays, facilitate learning, and alleviate family stress. These factors collectively build stronger foundations for children, enhance their educational achievements, and pave the way for inclusive education (Agrawal et al., 2023).

According to Boelter J. (2022), creating an inclusive early childhood education environment for children with communication disorders requires a multifaceted approach. Educators can support these children's unique needs by implementing various strategies, such as using universal design principles to create accessible classrooms, conducting developmental screenings, ensuring effective amplification devices, utilizing the residual hearing of a child, and adapting/accommodating/modifying infrastructure, learning material, teaching strategies and assessment. These strategies enhance learning experiences and support the diverse needs of children (NCERT, 2022). Furthermore, they emphasize

the necessity of tailoring inclusive strategies to address both early developmental needs and communication barriers, especially for children with disabilities in multilingual settings (UNESCO, 2021; Sharma & Loreman, 2019).

Equipping rehabilitation professionals with the necessary skills and knowledge to support children with communication disorders is crucial. Training should focus on evidence-based strategies for enhancing communication, including using uni-sensory and multi-sensory channels, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools, and Indian Sign Language. Additionally, professionals should be skilled in individualized assessment and intervention planning and techniques for fostering social interaction and language development within inclusive educational settings. This comprehensive approach ensures adequate support for the diverse communication needs of children in inclusive early childhood classrooms (Ziviani, et.al, P. 2013).

According to Nairn, J. (2023), educators should employ a variety of instructional formats, ensure semi-circle seating arrangements, and maximize the use of assistive technology. Understanding students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), developing behaviour management plans, and fostering a positive classroom climate is crucial. Differentiated instruction and learning styles, adaptation of teaching materials and resources, and the promoting of collaborative learning play significant roles (Yadav, S. & Upadhyay, A.2023). Furthermore, encouraging positive relationships and peer interaction, collaborating with a multidisciplinary team to provide comprehensive support, and engaging in continuous reflection and professional development are essential (Singh, K. 2023). These strategies empower educators to establish a learning environment that is inclusive, supportive, and effective for children with communication disorders, fostering academic and social success (Saikia, H. 2023).

Inclusive early childhood education in India faces several challenges, including a lack of trained educators, insufficient resources, cultural stigmas, and inadequate infrastructure (Singh. C, Pandey. Y, & Kushwaha. A., 2021). Many educators are not adequately prepared to address the diverse needs of children with communication disorders, and schools often need more materials and support systems (MoWCD, 2018). To overcome these challenges, several strategies are suggested: implementing comprehensive training programs for teachers and support staff, increasing funding and resources, conducting awareness campaigns to reduce cultural stigmas, developing and enforcing policies that mandate inclusive practices, and improving school infrastructure to accommodate the needs of all students. Additionally, fostering partnerships between parents, schools, non-governmental organizations, and government bodies help them share resources, expertise, and support systems (Kulkarni, K.A. & Gathoo; V. S., 2019).

Rehabilitation professionals are experts in helping individuals overcome physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional disabilities. According to Section 13 of the RCI Act, 1992, only those registered with the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) are authorized to practice in India. As of December 31, 2022, the RCI has registered 8,952 professionals and 15,436 personnel in the Central Rehabilitation Register, reaching 194,031 registered rehabilitation professionals (DEPwD, 2023). This study highlights the critical importance of early childhood development and the challenges children with communication disorders face in accessing equitable education. Given that over 85% of brain development occurs by age six, early intervention and appropriate support are crucial (NCFFS 2022). The study aims to identify effective strategies for fostering inclusive education, emphasizing the necessity of professional training, multidisciplinary collaboration, and adequate resource allocation. Henceforth, the existing study was undertaken to study the strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders.

#### **OBJECTIVES:**

- i. To study the early intervention strategies for communication disorders.

- ii. To equip rehab professionals with the necessary skills and knowledge to address communication disorders.
- iii. To study inclusive teaching practices and communication-focused pedagogies.
- iv. To examine the role of multidisciplinary teams in supporting inclusive education.
- v. To study the challenges in inclusive early childhood education.
- vi. To study and compare the impact of the field expertise of rehab professionals on their strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- i. What are the most influential early intervention strategies for addressing children with communication disorders?
- ii. What are the most effective approaches for providing the necessary skills and knowledge needed to address communication disorders?
- iii. What are the effective inclusive teaching practices and communication-focused pedagogies that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes?
- iv. What is the role of multidisciplinary teams in supporting inclusive education?
- v. What are the major challenges in inclusive early childhood education?

#### RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS:

The field expertise of rehab professionals has no impact on their strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders.

#### METHODS

A descriptive survey method was used.

#### PARTICIPANTS

Snowball sampling techniques across India selected one hundred seventy-three CRR holder rehab professionals working in special education as the participants. Table 1 presents the participants' characteristics.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Participants by Professional Specialization

Gender	Strategies for Fostering Inclusive Early Childhood Education for Children with Communication Disorders					Total
	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Intellectual Disability	Audiologist and SLPs	Other Disability	
Female	35	04	46	08	11	104
Male	37	08	18	0	06	69
Total	72	12	64	08	17	173

#### TOOL:

The Inclusive Education Strategies Test (IEST) was developed to assess strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders. The researcher developed tool assesses teachers' awareness and application of inclusive practices. Although the tool includes components of classroom adaptation, it has limited coverage of early intervention and communication-based pedagogies. The test comprised 20 equally weighted questions, evaluating the knowledge and competencies of RCI rehab professionals on topics such as early intervention, effective communication strategies, the importance of residual hearing, semi-circle seating arrangements, the role of a

multidisciplinary team, etc. Closed-ended multiple-choice questions were created based on these areas. Face validity was established with the help of 10 experts in special education. Cronbach's alpha scores of 0.712 and 0.718 confirmed the tool's reliability. Sample items from the IEST are presented in Table 2.

Area	Sample Items			
Strategies for Fostering Inclusive Early Childhood Education	1	What does SLP stand for in the context of communication disorders and therapy?		
	a	Standardized Language Program	b	Speech and Learning Pathway
	c	Speech and Language Pathologist	d	Social Linguistic Program
	2	Which age group typically falls under the early childhood category in educational contexts?		
	a	6-10 years	b	3-6 years
	c	10-14 years	d	14-18 years
	3	Why early intervention is essential?		
	a	It saves costs	b	It prevents all disabilities
	c	It improves the outcomes of the child	d	It is easier to implement in adulthood
	4	How can you utilize the residual hearing of a child with communication disorders?		
	a	Avoid speaking directly to them	b	Use lots of background noise to stimulate hearing
	c	Speak clearly when giving instructions to use a hearing aid	d	Use sign language only
	5	Why is a semi-circle seating arrangement essential for children with communication disorders?		
	a	It ensures they sit alone to avoid distractions	b	It allows them to see your face and mouth clearly
	c	It minimizes their interaction with peers	d	It prevents them from participating in group activities
	6	Which professional is typically involved in early intervention for communication disorders?		
	a	Pediatricians and Speech-Language Pathologists	b	Teachers and Parents
	c	Social workers and neighbour	d	Parents and neighbour
	7	When intervening with children with communication disorders, who is not a multidisciplinary team member?		
	a	Special Educator	b	Speech therapist
	c	Psychologist	d	None of the above
	8	What is a primary challenge in inclusive early childhood education?		

	a	Lack of funding and re- sources	b	An overa- bundance of special- ized teach- ers	c	Strict ad- herence to standard- ized cur- ricula	d	Limited parental involve- ment
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**Table 2:** Sample Items in the 'IEST'

## DATA COLLECTION

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary involvement in the study, with confidentiality maintained throughout the process. After obtaining consent and finalizing scheduling, selected rehabilitation professionals participated in the administration of the 'IEST'. Professionals were instructed to mark the most suitable option for each item. Completed response sheets were then gathered. Each correct answer received one mark, and incorrect answers were scored zero. Quantitative data were subsequently encoded and analysed using SPSS.

## DATA ANALYSIS

As a measure of frequency, percentage and mean scores were used to analyze the competencies of rehab professionals for strategies to foster inclusive early childhood education. ANOVA was used to analyze whether the field expertise of rehab professionals has any impact on their strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders.

## RESULTS

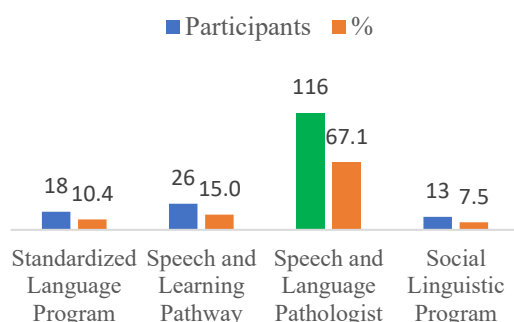
The inclusive early childhood education workforce involves special educators, speech-language pathologists, therapists, and other paraprofessionals who collaborate to support children with communication disorders. The increasing importance of early childhood education, particularly in inclusive settings, necessitates developing competencies in knowledge, attitude, and skills to adopt better inclusive teaching strategies for these children. This study investigates effective methods for fostering inclusivity and enhancing communication and learning for children with communication disorders.

### **(i) To study early intervention strategies for communication disorders.**

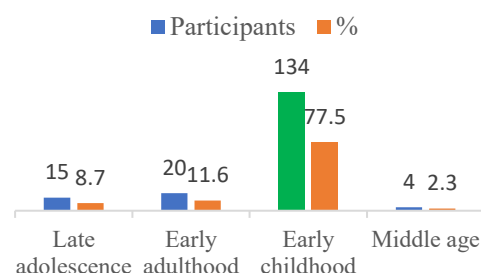
To investigate strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders, the study began by framing the research question *“What are the most effective early intervention strategies for addressing children with communication disorders?”* Figures 1-4 illustrate the responses quantitatively, presenting the numbers and percentages corresponding to the answers provided.



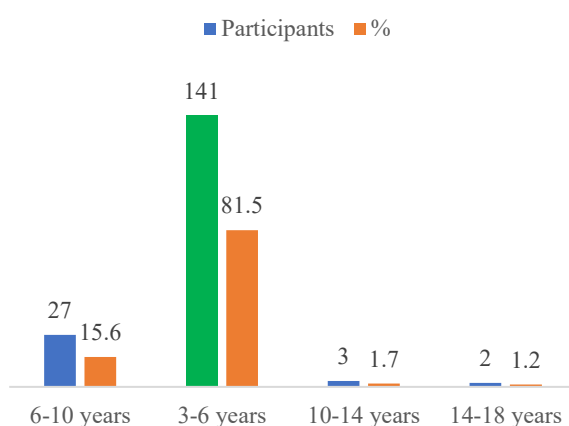
**Fig 1- What does SLP stand for in the context of communication disorders and therapy?**



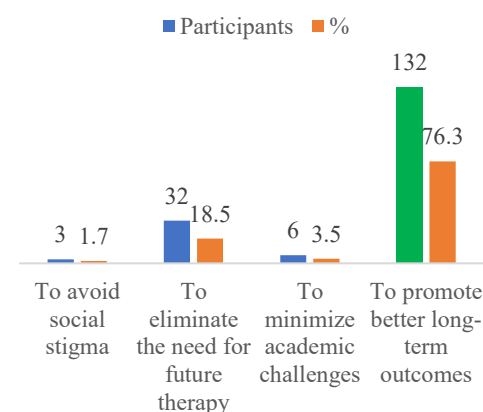
**Fig 2- At what stage is it crucial to conduct developmental screenings for communication disorders?**



**Fig 3- Which age group typically falls under the category of early childhood in educational contexts?**



**Fig 4- Why is early intervention important in addressing communication disorders?**

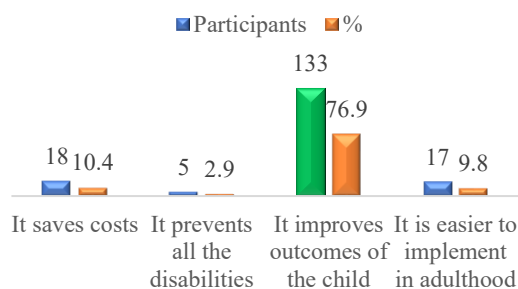
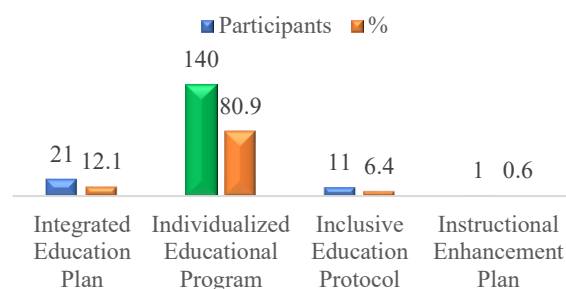
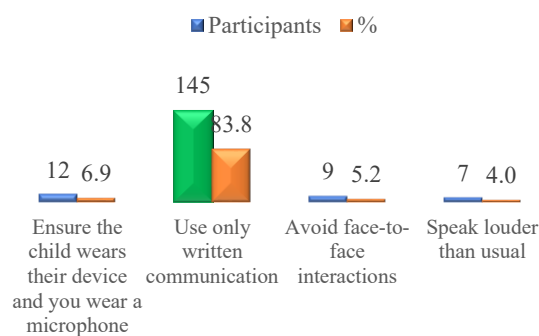
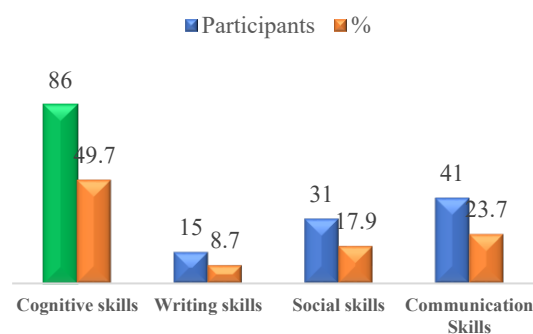


The analysis of responses from 173 rehabilitation professionals, as shown in Figure 1 indicated that 116 professionals (67.1%) correctly identified speech and language pathologists as critical professionals for addressing communication disorders. Figure 2 shows that 134 professionals (77.5%) correctly selected early childhood as a critical period for intervention. In Figure 3, 141 professionals (81.5%) recognized the age range of 3-6 years as crucial for intervention, while Figure 4 revealed that 132 professionals (76.3%) acknowledged that early intervention promotes better long-term outcomes.

(ii) To equip rehab professionals with the necessary skills and knowledge to address communication disorders.

To explore this objective, the study began by framing the research question *“What are the most effective approaches for providing the necessary skills and knowledge to address communication disorders?”* Figures 5-8 quantitatively depict the responses, showing the numbers and percentages corresponding to each answer provided.



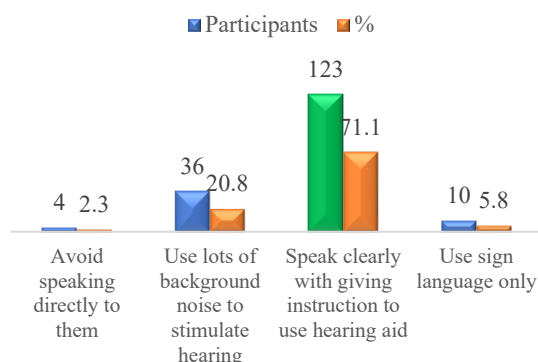
**Fig 5- Why early intervention is essential?****Fig 6- What does IEP stand for in education?****Fig 7- Which strategies ensures effective communication for children with amplification devices?****Fig 8- Children who are developmentally delayed are slower at acquiring**

The analysis of responses from 173 rehabilitation professionals showed significant findings: 76.9% correctly identified that early intervention improves child outcomes (Figure 5), 80.9% recognized the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) as crucial (Figure 6), and 83.8% acknowledged written communication as an effective strategy (Figure 7). However, only 49.7% recognized slower cognitive skill acquisition in developmentally delayed children (Figure 8).

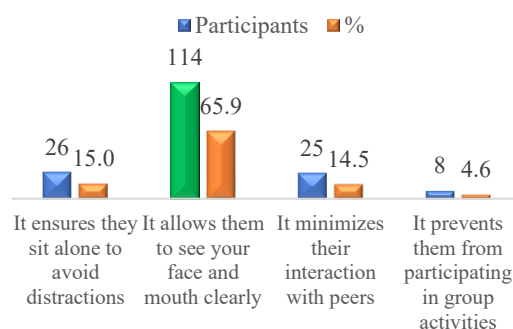
(iii) To study inclusive teaching practices and communication-focused pedagogies.

To investigate strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders, the study began by framing the research question *“What are the effective inclusive teaching practices and communication-focused pedagogies that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes?”* Figures 9-12 illustrate the responses quantitatively, presenting the numbers and percentages corresponding to the provided answers.

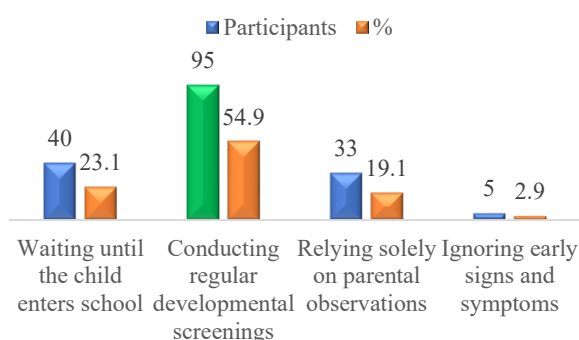
**Fig 9- How can you utilize the residual hearing of a child with communication disorders?**



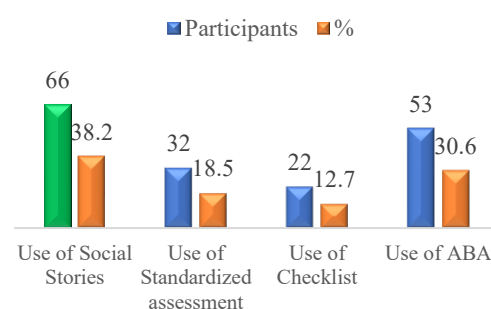
**Fig 10- Why semi-circle seating arrangement is important for children with communication disorders?**



**Fig 11- What is a crucial step in identifying communication disorders in children?**



**Fig 12- A technique that appears helpful in developing autistic children's awareness of normal codes of behavior**



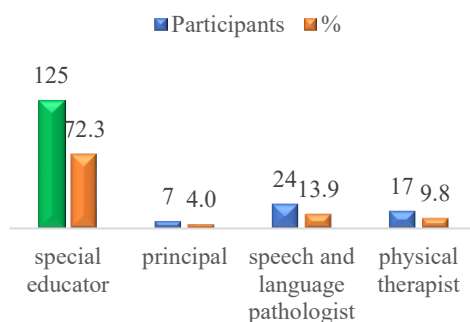
The analysis of responses from 173 rehabilitation professionals revealed significant findings: 71.1% correctly identified the use of residual hearing and hearing aids as important for clear communication during instruction (Figure 9), 65.9% recognized the benefits of a semi-circle seating arrangement for improving the visibility of facial expressions and mouth movements (Figure 10), and 54.9% acknowledged the importance of regular developmental screening in detecting communication disorders (Figure 11). However, only 38.2% recognized the efficacy of using social stories to promote the development of appropriate behaviour norms (Figure 12).

These results suggest that while many professionals grasp the significance of timely intervention and clear communication strategies, there is a need to enhance awareness regarding using social stories for behavioural development in children with communication disorders.

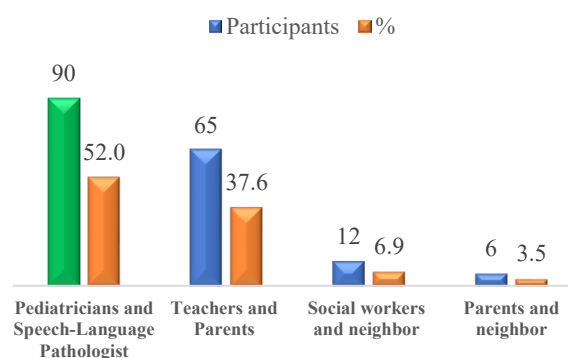
**(iv) To examine the role of multidisciplinary teams in supporting inclusive education.**

The study focused on fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders; the study began by framing the research question *“What is the role of multidisciplinary teams in supporting inclusive education?”* Figures 13-16 present quantitative data showing numerical responses and corresponding percentages to address this question.

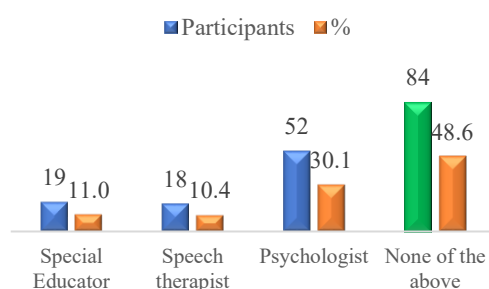
**Fig 13- The \_\_ provides insight into how emotional issues might be affecting academic performance**



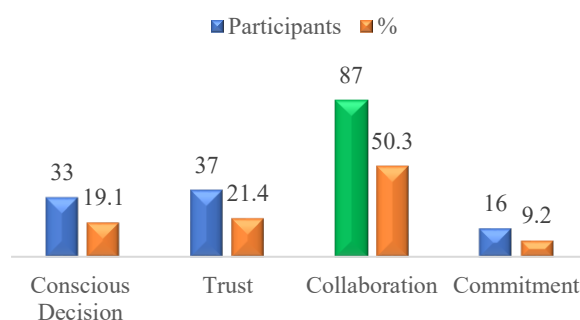
**Fig 14- Which professional is typically involved in early intervention for communication disorders?**



**Fig 15- Who is not the member of multidisciplinary team in intervening children with communication disorder?**



**Fig 16- What characteristic of an effective team is used to resolve differences?**

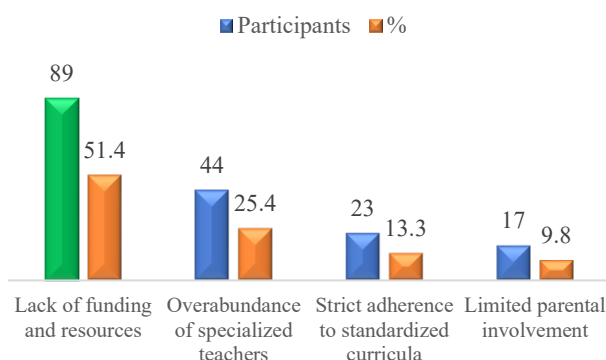


The analysis of responses from 173 rehabilitation professionals showed that 72.3% correctly identified special educators as pivotal in early intervention (Figure 13). Additionally, 52% recognized the roles of paediatricians and speech-language pathologists (Figure 14), while 48.6% acknowledged none of the above as the correct answer (Figure 15). Furthermore, 50.3% identified collaboration as a critical characteristic of effective multidisciplinary teams (Figure 16).

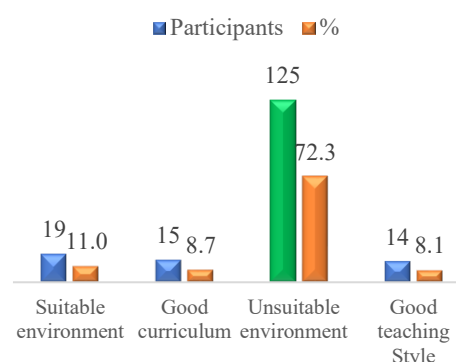
**(v) To study the challenges in inclusive early childhood education.**

To investigate strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders, the study began by framing the research question *“To what extent are the challenges in inclusive early childhood education?”* Figures 17-20 illustrate the responses quantitatively, presenting the numbers and percentages corresponding to the provided answers.

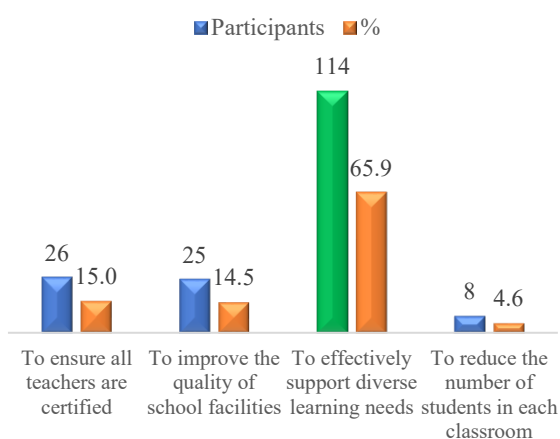
**Fig 17- What is a primary challenge in inclusive early childhood education?**



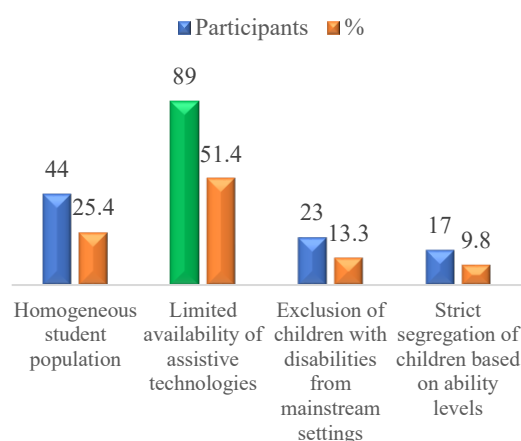
**Fig 18- Difficulties in learning arise from**



**Fig 19- Why is teacher training crucial in inclusive early childhood education?**



**Fig 20 - Which factor contributes to the complexity of implementing inclusive education?**



The analysis of responses from 173 rehabilitation professionals revealed significant insights. Specifically, 51.4% identified a lack of funding and resources as a primary challenge in early childhood education (Figure 17). Moreover, 72.3% recognized that an unsuitable environment poses difficulties in learning (Figure 18), and 65.9% emphasized the critical need for teacher training to effectively support diverse learning needs (Figure 19). Additionally, 51.4% highlighted the limited availability of assistive technology (Figure 20).

These findings indicate that while many professionals are aware of the challenges in inclusive early childhood education, there is a clear need to raise awareness and develop strategies to overcome these challenges for the improved education of children with communication disorders.

#### (vi) Impact of field expertise on their strategies for fostering IECE

The study further investigated the impact 'rehab professionals' field expertise on their strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders. The null hypothesis framed at the beginning of the study was that *"The field expertise of rehab professionals has no impact on their strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders"*. Data were collected using a Google Form questionnaire, and a one-way ANOVA was

conducted to analyse the relationship between the independent variable, field expertise, and the dependent variable, strategies for fostering IECE. For this purpose, the independent variable was categorized into five categories: (i) those having expertise in the field of hearing impairment, (ii) those having expertise in the field of visual impairment, (iii) those having expertise in the field of intellectual disabilities, (iv) those having expertise in field of audiology/ Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) and (v) those having expertise in field of other disabilities. The ANOVA table breaks down the data's variance into two components: a) the between-group component and b) the within-group component. The results obtained are mentioned below in Table 3.

**Table 3:** ANOVA - Expertise Vs strategies for fostering IECE

ANOVA						
	Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean of Square	F (observed)	p
Strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders	Between Groups	116.61	4	29.15	2.43129	0.049544
	Within Groups	2014.34	168	11.99		
	Total	2130.95	172			

The ANOVA analysis presented in Table 3 shows ( $F=2.431$ ,  $p=0.049<0.05$  at  $df(4, 168)$ ). The p-value of 0.049 is less than 0.05, which indicates a statistically significant difference between the means of various groups at the 5% significance level. Thus, the result was that "*rehab professionals' field expertise has a significant impact on their strategies for fostering inclusive early childhood education for children with communication disorders.*"

## DISCUSSION

The findings underscore the strengths and gaps in the approaches of rehabilitation professionals toward supporting children with communication disorders in inclusive early childhood education. Most professionals exhibit a strong understanding of the importance of early intervention and possess the necessary knowledge to effectively assist these children. However, the results also highlight areas for growth, particularly in recognizing cognitive delays and adapting strategies to meet these needs.

Although many professionals understand the significance of timely intervention and effective communication strategies, there is a noticeable need to enhance their awareness of using tools like social stories to foster behavioral development. Furthermore, while a majority have a moderate understanding of the role of multidisciplinary teams, only a minority demonstrate a robust comprehension of their potential in supporting inclusive practices for children with communication disorders.

The challenges associated with inclusive early childhood education remain a barrier for many professionals, pointing to the need for increased awareness and effective strategies to address these issues. The observed variations in strategies emphasize the impact on educational outcomes for children, reinforcing the necessity for systematic in-service training as a critical policy intervention. Notably, professionals with prior inclusive

training exhibit greater proficiency in adapting teaching methods, illustrating the benefits of targeted professional development. Additionally, the lower scores in communication-specific strategies across groups highlight significant gaps in both pre-service and in-service curricula. Addressing these gaps is essential for equipping professionals with the tools needed to support inclusive education effectively and improve outcomes for children with communication disorders.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings highlights the crucial role of early intervention, comprehensive professional training, and effective inclusive teaching practices in supporting children with communication disorders. The data demonstrate that most rehabilitation professionals understand early intervention and the competencies required to address communication disorders. However, there is a need for enhanced awareness of specific strategies, such as using social stories and recognizing cognitive delays. Additionally, the significant impact of multidisciplinary collaboration and field expertise on fostering inclusive education underscores the importance of targeted professional development and resource allocation. The study's datasets, generated and analyzed, can be obtained upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, ensuring access for further research while maintaining ethical and confidentiality standards.

## EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS:

The study underscores the necessity of continuous professional development for educators and therapists to make sure they are well equipped with the latest knowledge and skills to support children with communication disorders. It also highlights the need for increased funding and resources to address the challenges identified, such as inadequate assistive technology and insufficient training opportunities. By prioritizing these areas, educational institutions can create more inclusive environments that promote better long-term outcomes for children with communication disorders, ultimately enhancing their learning experiences and social integration.

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