

EXPLORING KEY ELEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to investigate key elements for effectively implementing inclusive education in schools in Nepal. A qualitative phenomenological research design has been applied to investigate the problem. Three community schools with resource classes were purposively selected as a representative sample from the districts of Rupandehi, Nawalparasi and Kavre. Interviews and focus group discussions served as the research tools for data collection. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed and utilized for the head teachers and resource teachers; whereas, questions for focus group discussion were developed and administered to the teachers of sample schools. The collected data were transcribed, grouped and categorized for their analysis. The findings reveal that several key elements are important for the smooth execution of inclusive education in Nepalese schools. These elements include disabled-friendly infrastructure; curriculum, teaching strategies and assessment; inclusive school leadership; implementable policies and legal instruments; trained teachers; active involvement of parents and community; positive attitude of teachers and peers; and adequate financing.

Key Words: *Children with disabilities, inclusive education, key elements, parents and community, resource class*

INTRODUCTION

The term “inclusive education” is widely used both in international and national education systems worldwide. Its origins can be traced back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which emphasized the right to education for everyone, and it states that education should be free, especially at the elementary and fundamental levels (United Nations, 2015). Likewise, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees equitable access to education for children with disabilities, free from any kind of discrimination (UNICEF, 1989). Further, the World Declaration on Education for All and the Framework of Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs, as outlined in Article 3(5), including that the learning requirements of the disabled claim special attention; emphasizes taking proactive measures to ensure equal educational access for every type of persons with disabilities as an essential part of the education system (UNESCO, 1990).

Furthermore, the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities clearly outline that education for individuals with disabilities should be a

fundamental component of national educational planning, curriculum development, and school organization (United Nations, 1993). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) includes the provisions of inclusive education focusing on special needs education, and the provisions include each child possesses an inherent right to education; each child has distinct characteristics, interests, abilities and learning requirement; those with special educational needs should be able to present in general schools which should adapt them with a child-centred pedagogy to meet their needs; and regular school with inclusive orientation are considered to be an effective means of eradicating prejudiced attitudes, fostering welcoming communities, and advancing towards inclusive society to attain education for all (UNESCO, Ministry of Education and Science, 1994, pp. viii-ix). The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) introduced six goals on Education for All, and the second goal was to ensure that by 2015, all children, especially girls, those facing challenges, and those from ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory, and quality primary education (UNESCO, 2000). Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CRPD] (2006) clearly articulate that individual with disabilities should not face exclusion from the mainstream education system due to their disability, and these children should not face exclusion from both free and compulsory primary education, and secondary education based on their disability (United Nations, 2006).

The Government of Nepal launched the Basic and Primary Education Project I (1992-1997) and II (1997-2002) and introduced special needs education for children with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 1997). The resource classes were established to provide education to these children to expand integrated education to move towards inclusive education (Department of Education, 2017). UNESCO (2017) states that inclusive education aims to modify structures and contents encompassing curricula, teaching methods and evaluation to eradicate obstacles in education and caters to the requirement of every student including children with disabilities. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees free education in braille for visually impaired citizens and in sign language for those with hearing and speaking impairments under Article 31, Clause (4) as per the law (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2015). Furthermore, the Department of Education introduced a more comprehensive inclusive education policy for persons with disabilities to ensure equitable access of these children to quality educational opportunities; providing quality life, skills and employment-oriented education as per the needs of citizens with disabilities; and making provision for lifelong continuous education for the citizen with disabilities (Department of Education, 2016). It demonstrates that there are policies and legal instruments to support these children's education.

This study is based on the education of children with disabilities who are in resource classes for their learning. The Government of Nepal is implementing special needs education and inclusive education. There are 380 resource classes attached to the community schools for these children across the country with trained resource teachers (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022). Various initiatives have been put in place, such as providing residential and non-residential scholarships, creating disability-sensitive learning materials, developing braille books and digital resources and establishing disability-friendly physical infrastructures which are intended to facilitate the learning of these children (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022). However, despite these efforts, the overall progress of the learning process remains unsatisfactory. Stakeholders are not meaningfully involved in the educational process.

It is worthwhile to describe some theoretical models of disabilities. The charity model regards individuals with disabilities as victims or objects of pity, viewing them as service recipients and

beneficiaries (Ju'beh, 2017). Shanimon & Nair (2014) include that the charity model views the individual with disabilities as the issue and reliant on the sympathy of others to offer support in a charity or well-being mode. The medical model sees the disabled person as a problem viewed through medical lenses and suggests fixing or treating the impairment (Rieser, 2008). The social model views that society creates barriers and negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities. Its focus is on transforming society by eliminating barriers to participation, increasing awareness and altering attitudes, practices and policies (Ju'beh, 2017). The rights-based model is rooted in the social model and aligns with the same principles that advocate for societal transformation (UNICEF, 2021). This model prioritizes equity and rights and looks for the equal inclusion of all individuals in society (Ju'beh, 2017).

It is equally important to mention the literature on the key elements which have a direct impact on the execution of inclusive education in schools. It demands wider participation and collaboration among different stakeholders. Access to children with disabilities in school, schools' infrastructures and teacher preparation are some important key aspects of implementing inclusive education. According to Kefallinou et al. (2020), inclusive school culture, inclusive curricula, pedagogy, and assessment, teacher professional development, communication, and collaboration with parents and communities, visionary policymakers, collaborative problem-solving, cooperative learning, teaching assistants, and transformational change are some of the elements that are accountable for the smooth execution of inclusive education in school. Likewise, Abbas (2023) asserts that legislation and laws, management and financial resources, schooling models, curriculum and evaluation, and teacher training are crucial elements of inclusive education in Egypt.

According to UNICEF (2021), the report mentions that the obstacles to the smooth execution of inclusive education include conflicting policies, adverse attitudes, and discriminatory practices. Furthermore, school environment and infrastructure, curriculum, teaching methods and assessment, suitable learning materials, acknowledgement and appreciation of diversity, and support services for students are crucial elements for the smooth execution of inclusive education in schools (UNICEF, 2021). Likewise, Mendoza and Heymann (2022) emphasize the significance of teacher training, organizing instructions in small groups, securing funding to enhance facilities, and establishing partnerships with stakeholders to advance inclusive education within the school setting.

The 'Toolkit on Disability for Africa' covers key elements of inclusive education as inclusion, accessibility, non-discrimination, reasonable accommodation, physical accessibility, availability, acceptability and adaptability (United Nations, n.d.). Likewise, the report on implementing inclusive education highlights essential components, such as a precise concept and definition of inclusive education; clearly defined objectives; indicators, measures and outcomes; an understanding of existing structural, educational, and cultural challenges to implement; implementation strategy with a clear plan, evaluation, and school assessment process; inclusive education training, ongoing support, and adequate resources for educators and school administrators; and national leadership concerning inclusive education policy, education management information systems, curricular-reform, and coordination of social systems (Schuelka, 2018). According to Forlin et al. (2014), the essential themes as elements of inclusive education are information dissemination, physical infrastructure, inclusive policies, the individual education plan, student discussions, staffing, linkage with outsiders, evaluation of academic progress, curriculum and teaching methodologies.

Moreover, Joshi (2021) identifies insufficient accommodation, teacher training, rigid curriculum, attitudinal hurdles, legislative gap, poverty, long distance to schools, and gender and disability discrimination as barriers to implementing inclusive education in Nepal. Further, Joshi

(2021) indicates that limited financial resources, inadequate disability awareness, and low prioritization of inclusive education are practical obstacles to executing inclusive education. To foster inclusive education, the educational system should embrace equity and inclusivity by incorporating diversity into the entire educational system encompassing curriculum, reading materials, and teaching and learning process (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022). According to the Dynamic Institute of Research and Development Private Limited [DIRDPL] (2014), limited parental awareness; minimal publicity of resource class schools; parental ignorance; limited effectiveness of inclusive education; least disabled-friendly school infrastructure and physical setting; and inadequate financial resources were hindering factors in implementing inclusive education in Nepal (p. viii). According to the findings of Lamichhane (2013), it is highlighted that the hindrances in implementing inclusive education included financial obstacles due to poverty of parental; hindrances arising from parental attitude, social stigma and inadequate consciousness. These barriers hinder the smooth execution of inclusive education in the schools. Based on the above literature and practices, implementors of inclusive education in Nepal are facing problems and they are not clear about the key elements of inclusive education which contribute to its effective implementation. So, this study helps identify major elements that play important roles in executing inclusive education at the school level.

The main objective of this research study is to explore key elements for the effective implementation of inclusive education in schools in Nepal. The following research question has been devised: What are the major elements for the effective implementation of inclusive education in schools?

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative research that follows a phenomenological research design. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2017), qualitative research employs an interpretive, naturalistic perspective towards the world that qualitative researchers investigate phenomena within their normal settings, trying to comprehend or interpret them based on the meaning people convey to them. Additionally, Creswell (2013) includes that a phenomenological study defines the shared meaning among various individual regarding their lived experiences with a concept or phenomenon.

Phenomenological study is an approach which focuses on understanding and interpreting individuals' lived experiences. The main emphasis of the phenomenological approach is to examine how individuals perceive and make sense of a phenomenon or event, which stresses subjective experiences. In this context, Moustakas (1994) states that while carrying out a phenomenological study, the researcher's knowledge is bracketing off (epoche) and first-hand fresh data and information are collected with the research participants. Likewise, according to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological reduction is carried out for textural description which is derived for obtaining meaning and essence to the phenomena. Thus, phenomenology explores what is experienced and how it is experienced. In this research study, the experiences of the implementors (headteachers, resource teachers and teachers) of inclusive education have been highlighted.

Interviews and focus group discussions were utilized as data collection tools. The semi-structured interview schedules were developed for the head teachers and resource teachers; whereas, questions were developed for teachers for focus group discussion. Three community schools where resource classes for children with low vision and visual impairment; hard of hearing and deaf; and intellectual disabilities are conducted were selected purposively as the sample from the districts of Rupandehi, Nawalparasi and Kavre. Six participants including three head teachers and three resource

teachers were selected from three sample schools for interview. 18 teachers participated in the focus group discussion. In addition, field visits were arranged in consultation with the head teachers of the sample schools. Then, field visits were carried out to collect the data by applying data collection instruments.

As Moustaka (1994) includes while analyzing the phenomenological data, it is crucial to transcribe individual texts by carefully listening to the recordings, reducing and eliminating data, grouping and organizing them into themes, and constructing a comprehensive description of the meaning and essences of the experiences that represent the entire group. So, after collecting the data, they were transcribed, reduced and eliminated as per its requirement, then grouped and generated the themes to analyze them. The collected data and information were checked to ensure that the generated phenomenological themes and texts represented their experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the analysis of data, and their results with a discussion on the following themes:

Disabled-Friendly Infrastructure

Disabled-friendly infrastructure is a crucial element for successfully implementing inclusive education at the school level. All head teachers, resource teachers and teachers unanimously agree that to implement inclusive education, schools must have disabled-friendly infrastructures that help children with disabilities to move freely within the school premises. Likewise, they emphasized that there is a need for an accessible classroom with ramp and wheelchair accessibility. With this analysis, the result is that disabled-friendly infrastructure is an important element of inclusive education, however, almost all schools lack such facilities.

The result demonstrates that the majority of schools lack disabled-friendly infrastructure. It has created difficulty particularly for children with visual impairment and intellectual disabilities for their movements. According to Barriga (2011), there is a lack of appropriate classrooms for these children and the inaccessibility of schools. Further, the report mentions that there is the least disabled-friendly school infrastructure and physical setting (DIRDPL, 2014). The Programme Implementation Manual (PIM) indicates that while constructing school buildings and toilets, it is compulsory to build ramps where wheelchairs can move at the ground level (Centre for Education and Human Resource Development, 2022). Although the government has made such provisions, in reality, it is not implemented completely as per the directives. So, priority needs to be provided to build disabled-friendly infrastructures which could promote access and learning for these children.

Curriculum, Teaching Strategies and Assessment

During the interview and focus group discussion, the participants came up with the idea that curriculum, teaching strategies and assessment are key elements for implementing inclusive education successfully in the schools for these children. The head teachers, resource teachers and teachers reported that present curricula, teaching strategies and assessment systems are not supportive and they are rigid and complex to implement for these children. The resource teacher said, "Teaching geometry and figures for children with visual impairment is too difficult" (RT, 1). Thus, the result is that present curricula, teaching strategies and assessments are rigid and are not supportive of these children.

As the participants mentioned the present curriculum, teaching-learning process and assessment system are not friendly and supportive to these children; they have to compete with

children without disabilities. Barriga (2011) presents the findings that the curriculum and assessment are inflexible. DIRDPL (2014) includes that there is a less effective and less desirable teaching-learning process and the absence of disability-specific support materials such as braille books, audio recording, images, and equipment; and deficiency of disability-related contents in curricula, textbooks and evaluation systems. The National Curriculum Framework mentions that the current curriculum falls short of adequately catering to the requirements of children with disabilities (Curriculum Development Centre, 2019). The present finding and the previous findings are equally relevant at this moment. Thus, a flexible curriculum, adapted teaching-learning process and adjusted assessment system are important elements for successfully implementing inclusive education.

Inclusive School Leadership

The participants clearly expressed their views that inclusive school leadership is an important element in implementing inclusive education in schools. In this regard, all head teachers reported that school leadership needs to be developed which is not materialized adequately at present in the school. They added that capacity building is required for them to promote and implement inclusive education. Likewise, the resource teachers stated that due to a lack of technical knowledge and enabling conditions, school leadership is facing difficulty in executing inclusive education effectively. In addition, teachers reported that they were not familiar with the concept and policy provisions and they had limited knowledge on inclusive education. It is found that school leadership is a crucial element in enhancing inclusionary practices in schools; however, the leadership role has not been performed adequately.

The school leadership should be competent and supportive to coordinate and cooperate among schools, teachers, students, parents and the community to conduct the school effectively. The result demonstrates that school leadership has not implemented inclusive education properly. Dorczak (2013) mentions that school leader needs to know and use the social process of organizational and individual learning to release and develop the talents of all teacher staff and students. The school leadership should be active in conducting orientation programmes for related stakeholders to remove attitudinal and environmental barriers by involving parents, teachers, peers & community (CBSE, 2020). Thus, school leadership should be goal-oriented and cooperative to provide support to execute inclusive education in schools.

Implementable Policies and Legal Instruments

All research participants confirmed that implementable policies and legal instruments are other key elements to effectively execute inclusive education in schools. In this regard, the head teachers reported that they were not adequately familiar with the policy provisions and acts, rules and regulation that caters to the requirement of these children. In addition, the resource teachers had some knowledge about inclusive education policy and the provisions of acts, rules and regulations from their training. In addition, teachers were completely unaware of policy, acts rules and regulations related to inclusive education. Overall, the finding is that participants lacked adequate familiarity with inclusive education policies and legal provisions.

The Department of Education (2016) initiated an inclusive education policy to ensure equal educational opportunities, life skills, employment-focused education, and lifelong learning for individuals with disabilities. The Constitution of Nepal has made the provisions that braille script should be used for visually impaired children and sign language should be used for children with deafness (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2015). The Act relating to the rights of persons with disabilities indicates that children with disabilities have the right to receive

education, training, healthcare, rehabilitation, employment preparation and recreational opportunities to integrate into society and foster personal development (Law Commission, 2017). Existing policies and laws are present, but the participants lack familiarity. Disseminating these provisions to relevant stakeholders is crucial for the effective execution of inclusive education at the school level.

Trained Teacher

Trained teachers are crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education and addressing the requirements of children with disabilities. The head teachers added that teachers who lack knowledge of inclusive education can't effectively support these children's learning. They further explained that teachers need training to facilitate inclusive education. Only resource teachers are trained on specific disabilities areas i.e., visual impairment, sign language and intellectual disabilities. In addition, the resource teachers expressed their views that they require more comprehensive and ongoing training. Likewise, focus group participants shared that teacher preparation is vital for the effective execution of inclusive education. The finding indicates that trained teacher is one of the important elements, and teachers lack training in inclusive education to meet the requirements of these children.

Teacher preparation is key to implementing inclusive education. CERID (2008) presents its finding that resource teachers have no full training in disabilities and there is a lack of inclusive education orientation for teachers. Likewise, Barriga (2011) presents that there is a lack of adequately trained teachers. It clearly shows that still the training of teachers is inadequate and without teacher preparation, there is no possibility of implementing inclusive education.

Active Involvement of Parents and Community

Active participation of parents and community is another important element for the successful implementation of inclusive education in schools. All head teachers and resource teachers emphasized the need for the active involvement of parents and the community in implementing inclusive education. At present, according to resource teachers, all parents don't visit the schools to inquire about their children's learning. They opined that parents only come to drop off their children in resource classes and do not visit school even during long vacations. Focus group participants noted limited involvement from both parents and the community, which causes a hurdle to effectively implement inclusive education. The result reveals that the involvement of parents and the community is essential; however, their involvement is found to be minimal.

The Education Act (1971) and the Education Regulations (2002) clearly articulate to involvement of parents and the community in different committees formed in schools as school management committees and parent-teacher associations (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2017). School leadership has a greater role in making parents and community involved in school activities. At the same time, it is equally important to make parents and the community aware of their roles and responsibilities to promote the learning of these children in the inclusive education setting.

Positive Attitude of Teachers and Peers

A positive attitude is crucial for the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools and communities. The treatment these children receive from their peers, teachers, head teachers, and staff directly impacts their inclusion. All head teachers noted improved attitudes towards these children. Likewise, the resource teachers also confirmed that students and teachers accept and

welcome the diversity of these children and provide support. Focus group participants acknowledged the positive attitudes of teachers and peers and still think they have limited learning abilities as compared to those without disabilities. Overall, the finding is that a positive attitude is gradually improved in teachers and peers towards these children.

To foster the inclusion of children with disabilities, it is vital to have positive attitudes from both teachers and peers. As Regmi (2017) presents the negative attitude of the teachers is critical, necessitating a modification of attitude that admires disability and diversity. Further, Regmi notes the challenging situation experienced by these children in general schools, where they often face neglect from teachers, peers, and other school staff members. CERID (2008) presents that there is a lack of inclusive education orientation for teachers and students. The present field finding is somewhat similar to the finding of Regmi (2017) and CERID (2008). Effective implementation of inclusive education in schools necessitates support and positive attitudes from all related persons and agencies to enhance the learning of these children.

Adequate Financing

The participants confirmed that adequate financing is a crucial element of implementing inclusive education. It demands structural and instructional reforms where adequate resource is required. In this context, the head teachers, resource teachers and teachers reported that the budget provided by the government is not enough to cover the expenses of these children in schools. They shared that there is no alternative option to generate additional funds for the schools. With this analysis, the result is that there is no adequate resource available to schools to bring reforms to inclusive education.

Smoothly implementing inclusive education in school necessitates sufficient resources to cater to the needs of these children. The result demonstrates that there was no adequate resource in schools. DIRDPL (2014) states that there is inadequate financial resource which hinders enrolment, retention and success of children with disabilities. Regmi (2017) included that inclusive education is hindered by schools' limited financial resources. The present finding is quite relevant to the findings mentioned above. Adequate resources need to be managed to provide support to these children during the implementation of inclusive education.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Inclusive education is an approach to offering education to children with disabilities. Several key elements contribute to its smooth implementation within schools. Disabled-friendly infrastructure is essential, allowing these children to move easily within the school premises using assistive devices. The existing curricula, teaching strategies, and assessment systems need to be flexible and adapted to support these children effectively. Inclusive school leadership plays a vital role by supporting and coordinating with teachers, students, and parents. However, existing policies and legal instruments have not been implemented adequately. Trained and competent teachers are needed to address the requirements of these children, and parental and community involvement is crucial for promoting their learning. The positive attitude of teachers and peers is another element that promotes the inclusion of these children in schools. Adequate financing is needed to successfully implement inclusive education. Overall, the above key elements are crucial for effectively implementing inclusive education in schools and facilitating the learning of children with disabilities.

The findings of this study will serve as a basis for policymakers and implementors to design and execute inclusive education effectively in schools. The identified elements will certainly contribute to enhancing the learning of children with disabilities.

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