A Study on the Perception of Visually Impaired Student in Inclusive Education: The Case of Sahil

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Abstract

Obstacles still exist in Nepali public and private higher education system, despite ample efforts undertaken to guarantee the successful implementation of inclusive education. The existing study highlights a single participant, Sahil, a visually impaired university student, encountering opportunities and obstacles in college life. The investigation was performed using a case study approach, and to fully understand Sahil's perspectives, the researcher interacted extensively with the subject's academic and university experiences. Participant's remaining time on campus and in class was closely and continuously scrutinized for five years (2017-2022). The field notes taken during observation and the interview transcripts were afterwards submitted for content analysis. The results show that while there are some opportunities for supportive comprehensive instruction, these do not guarantee that visually impaired graduates will obtain complete and satisfying instruction. The main obstacles to implementing inclusive education have been identified as inadequate funding, a lack of resource provisions, a shortage of trained specialists and fewer opportunities for professional progress. To ensure the successful implementation, it was recommended that educators, administrators, stakeholders, non-governmental organizations and responsible entities collaborate, provide profession-specific training and adequate financial assistance.

Keywords: Challenges, inclusive education, Nepal, visual impairment

Introduction

Students with visual impairments in inclusive learning environment may have been dealing with a variety of issues, particularly in the context of developing regions. However, inclusiveness in the academic field aims to serve the diverse needs and interests of students rather than dividing them into groups based on their skills, talents and requirements. Also, it focuses on allowing people to attend traditional schools without any prejudice (Schuelka, 2018). As education has become a fundamental right (Black, 2018; Gelber et al., 2021; Lusardi, 2019; Sharma) all people must be able to acquire and retain a sufficient level of knowledge. The idea affirms that every child's right to education must be respected and that no child should be denied the opportunity to attend higher education (Fountain, 1999). Educators, then, have a societal obligation to provide schooling to all individuals depending on their needs and abilities (Boelen, 2018; Mohanty & Mohanty, 2021; Schneider et al., 2022). Thus, inclusive education entails, as one component, placing a child with unique academic needs in a regular classroom rather than merely allowing them to attend regular or general schools or institutions(Saloviita, 2020).

To observe the data, an estimated of 19 million children worldwide are visually impaired (VIs) (Sankhi & Sandnes, 2020). So, inclusiveness, offering specialized help to these all students in normal classes despite their varied demands, can be of alternative thought. This strategy provides specialized training in age-appropriate regular courses for not just normal children but also learners with special needs (Li & Cheung, 2021). Among available various practices, integrated education allows students to study in school systems and constantly requires modifications to the curriculum, instructional strategies and dynamics in classrooms. This approach confirms every student's engagement in entire spheres of life including academics, social interactions and emotional development (Immordino-Yang et al., 2018). Further, the strategy emphasizes the teaching faculty's improvement and addresses children's requirements to promote inclusive classrooms and meaningful learning (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). Hence, inclusion refers to the adjustments set in classrooms to enhance quality instruction and enhance learners' effectiveness despite their various difficulties and challenges in life.

Numerous international conventions and conferences have paid increased attention to the availability of services. Following the *UNICEF Education for All Convention from 2000*, it was anticipated that children with disabilities would have meaningful access to the services necessary for inclusive education. Despite signing several UN international treaties and

policy documents, Nepal has low participation rates for children with disabilities and consistently fails to meet the requirements of an extensive number of prospective students. However, it has conflicting data on the prevalence and circumstances of disability such as *A 2001 UNICEF* research revealed a 1.63 per cent prevalence rate, whereas several district-level studies estimated 3-5 per cent (Dhungana & Kusakabe, 2010). Notably, prior research established that only a small percentage of Nepal's disabled population uses private and public services of inclusive instruction, creating an implementation gap and limited access(Lamichhane, 2017). Still, providing comprehensiveness to target communities with special needs seems challenging due to related issues with equity, quality, and access to learning opportunities.

Furthermore, higher-level students with disabilities experience a tough time in Nepal, according to the limited literature and available relevant documents. For example, Lamichhane's survey (2013) of high school students documented that persons with visual and hearing impairments experienced insufficient support systems in schools. Many other people with physical disabilities have to deal with difficulties imposed by their physical condition, preventing them from receiving a thorough education(Manandhar & Gaulee, 2022). Although it is a relatively new practice in Nepal, it may take time for teachers to acquire a positive attitude toward the concept, the majority of teachers in special and integrated schools appear to be supportive (Sharma, 2019). However, parents' financial limitations, their negative perceptions toward children with disabilities, their lack of acceptance and an absence of academic awareness were challenges for the pupils pursuing formal schooling (Lamichhane, 2013).

Despite several efforts to ensure the successful implementation of equitable educational opportunities, obstacles persist in Nepal's private and public sector colleges and universities. Therefore, inclusive education and its practical applications should be adopted in Nepali schools regardless of the exclusion of many children with disabilities from the system. To better understand the challenges and opportunities in particular institutions, researchers are highly motivated currently. The existing study employed a case study methodology to explore understanding and determine the constraints and opportunities faced by VIs enrolled in university courses in Nepal.

Literature Review

The implementation of a comprehensive learning system in academics has been delayed greatly lacking infrastructure, commitment, policy and finance. Resources cannot be allocated effectively where they are required because of inflexible regulations. Various

studies (Manandhar & Gaulee, 2022, Shiwakoti, 2022) in the local context have revealed that the concept is not fully implemented due to several problems that exist. However, Regnault (2022)offered background for the issue in his research and argued that comprehensive education enhances migrant assimilation and integration, particularly for Turkish and Arabian migrant families and their children. He underlined once more that discrimination could occur unintentionally despite being influenced by society's beliefs and views about particular social groups. In an earlier study, Teke and Sozbilir (2019) in eastern Anatolia concluded that the requirements of visually impaired students were disregarded in an inclusive learning environment, leading to complexity in understanding the symbolic meanings in some subjects like chemistry. According to Tieran's analysis (2021)of the Irish learning structure, students must have a practical awareness of inclusion to connect with peers in regular classroom settings and to promote inclusive academic engagement.

According to a previous Korean study (You et al., 2019), with the concept of engaging diverse students in a single learning environment, children with disabilities were able to engage in the classroom and made academic progress. Also, appropriate responses and examples provided by children without disabilities during lessons helped to encourage children's flexible behaviour. Likewise, an additional conclusion was revealed by Thompson et al. (2018) who claimed that general education settings give students a wide range of peers and adults with which to interact and communicate, which are the greatest places to concentrate on social skills goals. However, from the perspective of parents, Paseka and Schwab (2020) concluded that teachers can learn about their children's lives and customize instruction to meet the needs of each student. They think that teachers are highly passionate about what they do because they want to make sure that every child, even the weaker ones succeeds and learns a lot, particularly in inclusive classes.

The majority of the education specialists have acknowledged difficulties in implementing equitable learning strategies. Relating to this, in a South Asian study (Beutel et al., 2019) a participant mentioned that he referred to this as geographical isolation since "country people" in far-off places did not understand disability and some parents did not support their children's schooling with disabilities. However, Begum et al. (2019) in Bangladesh argued that poverty, gender inequity, ethnicity, remoteness, language problems, concerns for children with impairments and the adverse effects of climate are obstacles to adopting inclusion. Nevertheless, according to research(Shiwakoti, 2022) performed in the local context, the existing challenges are due to the lack of human resources, limited budgetary provisions and vagueness of policy.

Additionally, the involvement of parents in childrens' academic participation is critical. Concerning the idea earlier Regmi (2019)in the local context suggested that family members assist disabled children in participating in social activities and exercising fundamental human rights. He clarified that inclusive education aims to assure socialization, remove obstacles, motivate students to learning objectives and provide tools and support disabled students' needs in mainstream settings. However, in their study, Sankhi and Sandnes (2020) highlighted that participants using screen readers on donated cellophanes lacked knowledge of the devices' fundamental features and had unrealistic expectations for the technology because none of them had received specific instruction in using smartphone screen readers. This demonstrates the lack of innovative knowledge of the VIs of the existing context.

Despite numerous studies on VIs, a very less in-depth analysis of the current state of schooling has been identified in the local context. Thus, it is hoped that this study will help to identify the opportunities and challenges faced by VIs students in inclusive higher education in the local context. Also, it has been expected to suggest practical solutions that can be immediately put into practice for improved outcomes for visually impaired students in higher education.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

To accomplish this, a case study approach was employed to examine a phenomenon in terms of opportunities and problems from the perspective of a VIs student. Despite several forms of case studies, a descriptive case study was employed in this study, designed to explain an intervention or occurrence and the real-world setting in which it occurred with the idea of Yin (2003).

Participant

The researchers utilized purposeful sampling with a visually impaired university student whose academic and social behaviours were examined. Sahil, in his late twenties, a university student, lives with his wife and newly born daughter in a rented room. His parents, in the remote village, earn a living by farming or other stuff around. Sahil constantly seems in his college uniform and makes a living by collecting money from part-time teaching nearby community school. Sahil, his parents' only son has been blind by birth for an unidentified reason. Further, he had to try incredibly hard to afford his education because of his parents' measureable economic conditions and however, was lucky to have access to academics despite his parental poverty and illiteracy. Sahil (Appendix 1) was chosen for the study's

subject since the institution where the researcher worked, offered an inclusive atmosphere for students. He received regular interventions from the researcher in the academic setting for five years (2017-2022), leading him to investigate the events relevant to him.

Instruments and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and extensive observations inside and outside of college were used to collect data on the prospects and problems of integrated education for VIs. Appendix 2 contains the interview questions formulated by the researchers after reviewing relevant literature and expert feedback. With the participant's authorization, an audiotape recording was done during an interview to thoroughly capture the participant's response. Observations of the participant were conducted for five years (from bachelor's first year to master's first semester as an inclusive class student) gathering adequate information concerning classroom teaching and learning and beyond, to determine the type of infrastructure and academic facilities available on campus.

Data Analysis

Study data were gathered using transcripts from semi-structured interviews and field notes from observations. Initially, the researcher informally observed Sahil's activities for five years before the face-to-face interview, and the notable ideas on paper were documented. The field notes from the observation schedule were written up in a report and were divided into categories, and a summary of implications was supplied after each category and topic derived from the field notes the observational data was investigated utilizing interpretive, reflective analysis, based on researchers' understanding.

The information gathered through semi-structured interviews was presented and graded. First, the researcher listened to the interview audio recordings and transcribed them one by one, and the transcribed material was read multiple times. The key elements from each question's replies were presented in a report format and then grouped into areas such as supports, classroom practice, subject sensitivity, social and emotional challenges, and institutional environment and examination before the content analysis was completed.

Ethical Considerations

This research was executed following research ethics. Before executing an observation or an interview, consent was obtained from both the participant and the institution's management. To ensure participant's willingness and involvement, the study's purpose, methodology and data process were explained. The voluntarily participated respondent was aware that he wouldn't be harmed or forced into providing information before, during, or after the research. Before participation, the participant was assured that the

study would keep his identity private. The researcher also employed Merriam and Simpson's (1995)guidelines to verify that the study was ethical.

Results

The positivity of inclusive education

When asked about the practice of instruction, Sahil conferred a positive response. For example, he reported that being on campus with sighted classmates made him feel appreciated and acknowledged. Further, he explained that college enabled him to make friends, expand his social network and engage in interactions with students without disabilities. Concerning the idea he expressed:

> I am happy because of the encouragement I get from my peers. They lead me to my classes, in the outdoor activities, in the bathroom and occasionally even when I return home. They have even been my reliable place to share privacy. My exposure to subjects has been greater due to the discussions with them. I have no idea how things could have gone if I had attended an institution without such helping hands.

> During the conversation, he continued that he received support from peers in various circumstances. When he lost the way, his sighted friends would occasionally assist him in finding and additionally guide him around campus. In a discussion, he also communicated that he had improved collaborative habits among peers. He further added:

> I've made a lot of friends around the areas who help me discover new information. I sometimes forget to finish the assignments allocated by the instructors and have to wait for my few sighted classmates to read their textbooks for me. Furthermore, as I was preparing for the test, they tried to read their class notes and we asked each other general questions to prepare for probable exam issues.

This expression reflects his collaborative involvement with peers and meaningful learning engagement in an academic setting.

Challenges of inclusive education

Teachers' ability, expertise, and instructional approaches

The researchers also identified classroom instructors, with less equipped settings, lacking the necessary expertise and understanding to handle visually impaired graduates in university classes. It was well recognized that teacher preparation played a crucial role in teaching and learning processes at all levels. In response, Sahil stated:

> The majority of teachers seem to have lacked the skills and understanding required to adequately care for VIs because they were employing identical strategies as sighted students.

However, according to the data obtained, teachers struggled to inspire and motivate students and comprehend their problems relating to learning and teaching. In addition, the teacher supervised classroom activities and guided students' comprehensive academics constantly since every student learns differently. Additionally, it was identified that the instructor lacked the required skills and training to deal with VIs in university programs. For example, Sahil stated:

> In the class, teachers use phrases like 'Look at the board …', 'Turn on page number …', and 'As you can see on the screen…', which have no significance for students like me. They discuss the various illustrations, charts, and pictures inside the text, which would help me for a better and faster understanding of the content if I could view them.

From this expression, it can be implied that due to the terminologies implied during sessions, VIs students found complications in grasping ideas. Particularly, the lack of requisite knowledge in instructors to train VIs youngsters might be the reason led the situation.

Support

Regarding support, Sahil reported that some of his teachers were assigning less time to academics, which added to his boredom. And campus provided no extra assistance for special tools like braille. Neither college library had support materials nor do they have the mechanism to listen to their voice. However, he reported having received online support available on campus and engaged in course content. Also, he recalled the assistive nature of some teachers who provided him with audio recording permission during the class talk, and that helped him with revision at home.

For example, he said:

> Teachers' social and technical support during discussions inspires me. They motivate me to access and explore online resources. I appreciate their cooperation in guiding me to online resources. However, I do wonder why there's no question from the college management to me; 'Do you have any issues?'

> His comment displays his mixed emotions about his tutors. However, during the conversation, he claimed that except for some provisions from his campus, he did not have enough additional administrative support for educational reasons. He stated:

> I demand help for my fundamental necessities from responsible authorities.

Concerning classroom practice, Sahil revealed that the majority of college teachers lacked specialized training in innovative education, which considerably contributed to the dissatisfaction of VIs students. Traditional lecture-based teaching does not effectively

stimulate students' learning interests. Also, he noted a bitter experience that some teachers quit the classroom after lecturing and even missed expressing a word about the information written on the board, which is detrimental to students like him.

Subject sensitivity

Concerning the complexity of the courses, Sahil mentioned that the courses needing graphics, such as economics, population, science and mathematics led him to trouble. He preferred studying English being numerous study resources available online, requiring less assistance to access and advance from various freely available mobile applications privately. Connecting the ideas he said:

> The most challenging circumstance I've ever encountered was when I had to tackle mathematical problems during school days. I couldn't simply find private tutors, nor could we get the time we required from the teachers. In reality, it could have been difficult to manage for teachers as well. Because I had heard about the rigours of these subjects, I opted for language. At the very least, I can memorize what I listen to better.

> Institutional Environment and Examinations

Despite some encouragement from classmates, he appeared to be worried about the situation. He witnessed his friends doing whatever they wanted inside and outside the house, alone or in groups, including group projects and sports like football, volleyball and cricket. They make him feel inferior and isolated from the group. He does, however, appear to be optimistic about the developing technology and some government financial support programs. He stated:

> Many times, I've felt hopeless because I couldn't do several tasks on my own. Friends, who play in groups, make fun of visual objects and discuss movies and live matches make me feel as if I lack the meaning of life. Again, I question myself and find an optimistic light insight with the emergence of technological devices making everything easier and accessible, particularly the government initiatives that could help individuals like me.

> Despite receiving help from peers with everything from schoolwork to exam

preparation, and as an exam writer, he communicated experiencing a stressful moment and expressed displeasure with the inclusive settings of exam conduction and mechanism. He recalls several occasions when he had to make compromises when writing an exam. For example, dealing with outside noise, lacking an invigilator at specific times, restroom access problems and miscommunication between the writer and him about exam questions.

However, assigned additional exam hours and the invigilator's favourable management and services left him thankful. Supporting the ideas he said:

> No words can explain how helpful friends have been in everything from classroom activities to exam writing. I have no other options, though. I have both positive and undesirable exam experiences. While my writer is listening to me during the exam, I can hear the noise from outside. Sometimes, I can't find authentic individuals to discuss my issue in the exam hall. Similar problems exist with the restroom, as the exam room is managed differently. However, what makes me happy is the extra time assigned to write and the supportive behaviour of the exam officers.

His expression reflects his mixed understanding of the academic atmosphere in his university life. The current study employed a case study approach to investigate and identify the limits and opportunities that confronted VIs enrolling in university courses in Nepal.

Discussion

In the study, Sahil contends that family support for education or well-being, and the empathy displayed by the majority of people in a variety of settings, including workplaces, institutions, homes and public transportation are the signs of privilege. Instructors who provided emotional support to students with visual impairments have been identified as an additional opportunity to successfully integrate into inclusive education. Additionally, the networks that college students develop may help them achieve both academic and vocational goals.

The findings reported both positive and adverse experiences of VIs in the university setting. The inclusive academic environment and a common forum for discussion led to cooperation, sharing and extensive academic exposure to VIs, which is parallel to the finding of Regnault (2022). In addition, students with visual impairment were delighted with the smooth social networking, enabling them to share knowledge and take advantage of opportunities for professional promotion. Similarly, in an interactive atmosphere, VIs might foster useful talents and problem-solving abilities. In contrast to the earlier findings of Sankhi and Sandnes (2020), the existing case study determined that teachers lack the knowledge, expertise and training necessary to handle inclusive programs. And fewer resources were made available to them, for example, they experienced adverse physical accessibility, limited student exposure, less encouragement and incentive to learners and rarer consideration for individual differences and provision of special VIs programs.

However, the study reveals that students' confidence was strengthened by administration officials and easily available online resources, regardless of inadequate teaching hours and

few obsolete learning resources. Furthermore, the study stated problems with their assignments and evaluation systems due to the lack of specific skills in tutors, which is contradictory to the situation of Thompson et al. (2018) where VIs accessed a range of peers with opportunities to engage and communicate as the greatest venue to work on social skills and achieve a meaningful goal. Still, participants discovered issues with teacher preparation influencing classroom activity, expressed dissatisfaction with the administration's lack of responsiveness and pleaded for additional assistance. This contradicts Paseka and Schwab's (2020) conclusion, where they observed parents' perceptions who believe teachers' ability to learn their children's lives and customize their instruction to meet the needs of each student effectively.

The current research revealed problems with the instructors' visual exposers in the inclusive classroom and highlighted the importance of providing thorough explanations to resolve the issues associated with VIs. Additional concerns were raised about the college's unfavourable geographic location and the officers' inspection and monitoring during the examination; however, Begum et al. (2019) earlier argued that barriers to embracing inclusion include poverty, gender inequality, ethnicity, isolation, language problem, and children's fears about disabilities. According to a local study (Shiwakoti, 2022) and confirmed by the current study, the primary challenges to special education are; lack of human resources, limited budgetary funds and policy ambiguity.

Besides, the research indicated that students with Vis were anxious about missing out on close and active participation in social events that their sighted classmates enjoyed. Remarkably, when friends provide them with a helping hand all the time it makes them feel glad. The survey also established that VIs frequently referred to favourable occurrences as opportunities, such as a large social network created while in college, strong family support, emotional and sympathetic backing from professors and administrative financing support.

Finally, it is advised that administrators and educators broaden their awareness of services for all learners, establish support systems and create adequate physical and academic resources and equipment, including Braille and support measures for VIs learners in institutions. The government should provide financial and supportive policy support to raise VIs' status and establish comprehensiveness in Learning to improve VIs' involvement and inclusion in Nepali education.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the investigation allow for the following inferences. First, there aren't many options for VIs in inclusive higher education and stakeholders haven't yet cleared the way for implementation. The higher education institutions also encountered a number of operational challenges with inclusive education, such as a lack of instructional resources, insufficiently competent and skilled workforce, a lack of equipment accessible to disabled and most importantly, the unwillingness of stakeholders to change. Also, the institution does not seem to monitor and perform systematic or periodic assessments to identify and calculate students' requirements with visual impairment. Despite the efforts of a small number of instructors to meet students' needs, for example, providing students with internet access to obtain freely available learning materials and leading them to social interaction and meaningful collaboration, some stakeholders found themselves with less time for supervision, limited financial commitment, inadequate support and encouragement and the lack of alteration in their approach to teaching. It was recommended that stakeholders, non-governmental organizations and relevant parties collaborate, provide profession-specific training and supply substantial financial support to enable the successful implementation of inclusive education and promote quality education for students with disabilities.

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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