Bridging the Gap: Exploring Practices and Challenges for Including Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Classroom

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the perception of students with disability towards the existing practice of inclusive education in mainstream schools. The qualitative research design along with interpretative phenomenological approach was employed in this study. Four students with disabilities including physical, deaf and children with visual impairment were purposively selected from integrated school located in Kathmandu Valley. In-depth interview was taken through semi-structured interview guidelines. The thematic analysis technique was applied to generate findings. The themes were discussed by linking with prospective and literature. The findings reported as setting disable friendly infrastructure, professional development opportunity for teachers, technology-based instruction and teacher's collaboration are essential strategies for inclusion. Meaningful inclusive education practices maintain a supportive and equitable learning environment for all types of children including those with disabilities. To implement inclusive practices in the classroom, administrative hurdles, infrastructure barriers, technological barriers, environmental barriers and legislative barriers are the major challenges in practising equity strategies in the classroom. The findings can contribute to set up effective practices for combating such challenges. By using the scope of the study, the policy maker, education planners and teachers can level up appropriate strategies for increasing the access of children with disability in education.

Keywords: Interpretative phenomenology, technology-based education, environmental support, inclusive education practices

Introduction

Disability is a social construct, which embraces the participation restriction in the social domain. Disability is not fundamentally the question of medicine and health but it is the concept of creating dehumanization (Baraily, 2024b). The person with disability has an inability to involve in social activity in comparison to person without disability. They perform tasks in small amounts due to functional limitations of specific parts of the body (right of a person with Disability, 2074). Right of a person with disability 2074 categories ten types of disability such as physical, intellectual, visual impairment, autism, deaf and hard of hearing, speech and communication disorder, psychosocial disorder, hemophilia and multiple disabilities. Based on severity, disabilities are classified as mild, moderate, severe and profound.

As promulgated in the constitution, education is a fundamental right of human beings. In the beginning, children with disabilities were educated in segregated approach in the mainstream school to fulfil the goal of a universal declaration with education for all but later on, it is realized that society is for all not for someone (Phuyal et al., 2006). Since the 1990s, children with disability have been provided education by keeping in regular classrooms with the integrated approach for creating a common platform for inclusive education (Anderson, 2006). As propounded by Lev Vygotsky, knowledge is constructed from the social setting and the child can develop his personality himself from the social system (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018). In looking back to world history, the education delivery system for children with disability was derived from two concepts. One is a segregated approach and the other is an integrated approach (Kobayashi & Kuboyama, 2003). After the World Conference on Special Education, Spain Salamanca held in 1994, inclusive education with general class placement was conceptualized as a milestone for the education of children with disability.

Inclusive education offers a democratic concept in education and children feel they are learning together collaboratively (Jaramillo, 1996). The school confidently delivers the service with the motto of no child left behind in the social transformation. Our country is diversified with verities of differences such as age, gender, sexual orientation, caste, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability and so forth. Our country has committed to providing education for all types of children regardless of their differences without any type of discrimination as per the legislative provision (Adhikari, 2016). To increase the access of children, the nation has initiated a variety of efforts and programs. The initiatives for inclusive education need to increase the access of children in education and develop a basement for managing diversity in the classroom (Thanem, 2008). The Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) has asserted that inclusive education is a multicultural

strategy adopted against any type of discrimination to ensure the rights of people to be educated in their respective communities. Inclusive education assumes that every child can learn with appropriate support and a favorable environment (Gould et al., 2020). It emphasizes the equity-based environment to increase the access of children to education. It can promote child centered learning approach by identifying the learning needs of children who are deprived of the facilities provided by the government.

Legislative Provision

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has promulgated that education is a fundamental right for every citizen (Articles 31.1 and 31.2). Moreover, every child has the right of free and compulsory education upto the basic level and free up to the secondary level. Likewise, free education is provided for children with disability and economically deprived children. Accordingly, children with visual impairment and deafness have the right to be educated with Braille and sign language (Secretariat & Durbar, 2015). According to NESP 1971 (Ninth Amendment), inclusive education is education for the blind, low vision, deaf, deaf-blind, autistic, intellectually disabled, and physically disabled by placing them in regular education. Moreover, the Rights of the Person with disability act 2074 was enacted to provide that higher education for children with disability should be free. Vocational and technical education should be provided to children with a disability under the Education Act. In the Inclusive Education Policy 2017, children with disability need to be educated with children without disability in suitable places. Children with disability should be provided essential materials like wheel chairs, white canes, slate, stylus, tactile material, and symbolic charts (Maudslay, 2014).

Several initiatives have been adopted for including children with disabilities general classroom as per the commitment in universal conference. However, more than 50% students with disabilities are still out of school as shown in the enrollment situation of school-aged children. The major concern of the study is what efforts and practices are in existence for including children with disabilities in general classroom. The significant challenges that the teachers and students face in adapting heterogeneous classroom undertakes the concern of the study. This study seeks answers of these research questions.

1. How do students with disabilities perceive about the existing practice of mainstream classroom?

2. What challenges do the students face while learning in the mainstream setting?

Methods and Procedures

Qualitative research design with phenomenological approach was employed for this study. This approach tried to dig out the shared meaning of the similar lived experiences of students for the same phenomena (Creswell, 2013). In this prospective study, the adopted design helps to study the students' lived experience in general classroom (Neubauer et al., 2019). The experiences and narratives are drawn from the social setting of the general course based on values and beliefs (Van Lankveld et al., 2017). The teachers who participated in this study were struggling to teach students with visual impairment in an integrated school (Baraily, 2024c). Altogether four teachers from the secondary level were purposively selected from the integrated school located in Kathmandu Valley.

Regarding ethical issues, we obtained informed consent from the participants about the research project on the first visit to the school. Confidentiality has been ensured by using pseudonyms. In-depth interviews via interview guidelines were taken to gather information. Data analysis revealed the themes of collaboration and interactions with students. Interviews with the participants were recorded by audio recorder. Recorded interview responses were transcribed verbatim and developed code. Likewise, global themes were extracted for the main findings of the study.

Results and Discussion

This section uncovers the major findings from the experience of participants in a thematic way. The key findings are discussed with relevant literature and theory that leads to essential practice for inclusion and explores coping strategies for significant challenges that appeared in the creation of inclusive classrooms. The key findings are discussed below for deriving a conclusion.

Disable Friendly Infrastructure

The inclusion of children with disability initiates from the favorable environment within school. The children possessing a variety of disabilities seek friendly infrastructure within the school including classrooms, furniture, washroom, canteen, administrative office and student welfare office (Thapaliya, 2018). In this context, participant P1said:

> When I started visiting this school, I was often afraid of walking on the footpath. The paths near the school are not appropriate for moving wheelchairs. In school, there is no ramp to move around the school. Hardly have I reached school with a wheelchair but there is inadequate place within the classroom.

In this concern, the existing physical environment seems to be inappropriate for children with physical disability. For active participation in the classroom, the classroom should be wider so that the wheelchair can move freely around. In adequate passage, the teacher can reach to last bench and monitor the activity of each individual(Hewett et al., 2020). The easy access of students with disability in the classroom enhances the magnitude of involvement in the classroom. So school administration should focus on developing disabled-friendly infrastructure following the nature of disability. Another participant said:

> I have a visual problem; I cannot see letters on the whiteboard. due to the far distance from school, I arrive later, and the front seats are already occupied by the early comers. I have difficulty seeing the writing on the board without a magnifying glass.

In the above narration, the students with low vision are unable to see the writings on the board. Making notes from the classroom instruction is impossible due to the visual deficit. Therefore, the children with low vision need to be facilitated with a magnifying glass and the letter in the board should be large as far as possible (Hewett et al., 2020). If possible, the seating arrangement for the low-vision student needs to be fixed at the front to make it easier to copy notes from the whiteboard. The teacher needs to design a lesson plan by focusing on the diverse needs of learners (Campbell et al., 2003). The individualized education plan is imperative to meet the unique needs of each child with a disability. Children with disability need to be included in educational and recreational settings for their development and well-being (Ball et al., 2005).

Training for Staff

Updating knowledge and skills for enhancing professional efficacy in the relevant areas undergoes staff training (Triviño-Amigo et al., 2022). The teaching and non-teaching staff increase their competency to deliver client-focused service. The professional development activities of staff maintain a welcoming environment for children with disability in the school (Tristani & Bassett-Gunter, 2020). In this context participant said:

> In this, schoolteachers do not have training in inclusive education since they enter this school. Regular training is required to communicate effectively with children who have speech, and language impairment. Sign language training also needs to be provided for teaching students with deaf and hard of hearing.

In this concern, the school staff who work with children with disability need

to know about diversity management. Each person should communicate freely to create an inclusive environment. A welcoming environment for all types of learners needs to be created by providing adequate staff training (Baraily, 2024c). The pre-service, in-service and refreshment training for teaching and non-teaching staff makes an accepted environment for children with disability in ensuring the rights of children to be educated (Avramidis et al., 2000). By adequate training in inclusive education, the non-teaching staff also develops sympathy and affection for the child who has cognitive impairment.

Educational Support

The support provided for the students by teachers and administration in school refers to educational support. The student modifies their behavior as expected with adequate support from the school (Aron & Loprest, 2012). The proper educational support improves students with better learning outcomes for mainstream curricula. In this context, participant said:

> Children with disability are limited to the standard curricula due to their functional limitations. The diverse needs of learners require resiliency in the mainstream curriculum so that they can get life support after the acquisition of knowledge. Individualized education plans and specialized instruction are sharply used for teaching students with disabilities.

In this concern, children with disability are unable to accommodate in mainstream curriculum with their functional impairment. The mainstream curriculum cannot address the individual needs of learners with disability. The major vignette of inclusive education is to assist students in a dignified life in society (Tamayo et al., 2017). Inclusive education does not mean placing children with disability in regular classrooms. The fundamental principle of inclusive education embraces equitable access, effective participation in classroom discourse and respect for diversity (Maudslay, 2014). To include all the children in education, a child-friendly environment is a minimum requirement and the physical and educational environment needs to be reframed as disabled-friendly at any cost (Boitumelo et al., 2020). Moreover, children with disability should be educated as social beings by creating a disabled-friendly environment. Children with disability need to be educated by developing individualized education plans with proper updates fora certain duration. The teachers and staff should be trained regularly to foster an inclusive environment within the school.

Social Support

The variety of support provided for children with disability in social adjustment in their daily activity undergoes with social support (Tétreault et al., 2014). In the absence of social support, children with disability are deprived of accessing their rights to be social beings (Hebbeler & Spiker, 2016). The participation restriction cultivates continuously without community support. In this context, participant said:

> Frankly speaking, policy made in this country has not explicitly supported the inclusion of children with disability and remains segregation and exclusion in society. The negative attitude and misconception towards disability are creating an unwelcoming environment within the school as well as society. Such type of stenotypes affects self-esteem and willingness to participate.

In this concern, the policy and law for disability rights are adequately formulated in the context of Nepal as committed in the universal declaration for increasing access to education. Nevertheless, some of the community people still keep negative and stereotypical thoughts towards disability. It is considered that disability is a result of the sin of past life. Disabled persons are undervalued and burdened by the society. They think that disabled persons are consumers but not producers. To remove such kind of thought from mindset, disability awareness and dissemination of law need to be sharply organized in the community. They should be aware that the legal punishment is against the law. The stakeholders for ensuring the rights of children need to be accountable for creating a welcoming environment through public awareness in the school and society.

Technology-Based Technical Education

The delivery of content with the use of appropriate technology for effective learning refers to technology-based education(Lombardi et al., 2018). Technical education is today's demand in society. Education requires technical education in verities of sectors of society. Technological education includes the use of assistive devices and software for simplifying content in the respective areas (Harvey et al., 2020). In this context, participant said:

> This is the era of the 21st century and the skills and knowledge need to become critical thinkers and knowledge producers rather than consumers. Technical education does help to fight life problems. The technology-based education supports students to solve problems in new ways. The children with a disability may feel participatory in the knowledge construction process with full potential.

In the above statement, the present education systems require educators should adapt to 21st-century skills that lead the society to face global challenges. The students must stand as knowledge creators rather than consumers. The traditional content and pedagogy cannot address contemporary societal needs and individual aspirations (Baraily, 2024b). By the use of assistive technology, the teacher fully accommodates students in his classroom activity with full attention. The teacher needs to use full of technology-driven pedagogy to deliver content and make students actively involved in the learning process (Baraily, 2024a).

In the same context, as above, another participant said:

> Technological-based education is a milestone for tackling contemporary educational issues for today. Technology finds the solution quickly and constantly. In the use of technology in learning, the complexity of matters gets simplified and meaningful. Children with disability can reduce their cognitive deficiency by using assistive technology.

In the above concern, the use of technology in education has transformed the traditional classroom setting and provided new opportunities for learning and teaching. Technology such as digital classrooms and learning management systems, interactive learning tools, educational apps and ramification artificial intelligence and machine learning are the key ways technology is being used in education (Regmi, 2017). These tools can facilitate communication between teachers and students, organize coursework, track student progress, and provide a platform for online assignments and assessments. Another participant said:

> At present, the technology-based education has no alternatives. The teaching and learning styles have been converging to the needs and interests of learners. Software like screen reader, and optical speech synthesizer have made the most effective means of knowledge acquisition for children with visual impairment particularly.

In the above concern, the paradigm shift in pedagogy has transformed the traditional mode of teaching into a new way of learning through technological advancement. With the use of technology, teachers can enhance the engagement of students through interactive lessons, support diverse learning styles, and make learning more dynamic (Lakshmi, 2018). The proper uses of technology strengthen communication and collaboration among students and teachers supporting remote learning, group projects and discussions (Šiška et al., 2020). The government needs to manage adequate funds for managing resources in community schools with technological support to increase the access of marginalized and disadvantaged children.

Environmental Barriers

The surrounding condition that impedes the learning of children with a disability refers to the environmental barrier. The physical and emotional situations that can affect the transmission of knowledge are termed environmental hurdles (Banik et al., 2015; Graham, 2020; Priyanka & Samia, 2018). The narrow space in the classroom, lack of disabled-friendly furniture, unfriendly washrooms, and pathways inside the school are major barriers to accessing smooth learning outcomes (Banik et al., 2015). In this context, participant said:

> In the classroom, the situation is noisy and crowded. The strong lighting can be overwhelming for us for sensory processing. We find it difficult to focus and participate in classroom discourse. The student with a disability needs to take breaks needed for sensory processing. In the absence of a quiet and calm space, it is difficult to accommodate mainstream instruction.

In the above concern, the existing classroom consists of a mass of students. In this situation, each student is deprived of intensive support. The need-based contents, pedagogy and instructional strategies are difficult to employ in the classroom due to the large number of students (Hemmingson & Borell, 2002). As proposed by the constitution, basic education is a fundamental right to be educated. The teacher himself realizes that mass teaching is one of the

major barriers for children with disability. In such conditions, the school must manage the appropriate size of the classroom for the convenience of teaching. In small groups of teaching, the teacher can employ individualized instruction.

Physical Barriers

The obstruction created by unsuitable physical environments like inaccessible buildings, inadequate washroom facilities, and lack of playground equipment and transportation problems refers to the physical barriers (Hemmingson & Borell, 2002). In the Nepalese context, many schools lack ramps, elevators, and wide doors ways. The unsuited physical condition makes it difficult to mobility for accessing the classroom, playground and other areas. In this context participant said:

> In this school, restrooms are not equipped with appropriate facilities like grab bars, accessible sinks and enough space to move wheelchairs inside the classroom. The playgrounds have no equipment accessible for children with physical disability such as swings, slides and climbing structures that need significant physical disability to use. The problem of accessible transportation options and from school is a significant barrier for us.

In this concern, the existing physical condition of the school is not disable-friendly and impedes the mobility of children with physical disability. The classroom space is not enough for moving wheelchairs. Children with a physical disability face problems in the playground due to inappropriate equipment (Wang, 2019). The transportation problem also impedes the accessibility to education. So the school should emphasize building disabled infrastructure within the school regarding curricular and extracurricular activity. The government needs to minimize the transportation problem by managing adequate funding for infrastructure development. The right of children with disability to be educated in their local communities should be ensured under the legislative provision and policy implementation. The educational access of children should be strengthened by providing residential scholarships, transportation support, and caregiver services for children who are at risk (Graham, 2020). By recognizing and addressing the physical barriers, we can create more inclusive environment for increasing the participation of children with disabilities in every academic activity. Another participant said:

> In over-viewing the funding structure, the allocated budget for the education sector is low. In the education budget, the allocated amount in professional development for teachers and quality enhancement in inclusive education seems to be countless. Limited funding for disability-inclusive infrastructure and services can prevent necessary accommodations from being made.

In the above concern, the budget allocation for the education sector is very low. The inclusive education sector is severely affected by the limited budget in the side infrastructure and entire management (Chimhenga, 2016; Priyanka & Samia, 2018). The professional development for teachers in the area of inclusive education is falling into the shadow, and consequently, inclusive education is becoming a buzzing word in the education domain (Wall, 2002). The national commitments for the global society are ejaculated with financial restrictions. Therefore, the government needs to disburse an adequate budget for inclusive education by initiating a global partnership with donor agencies to promote quality education (Chimhenga, 2016; Priyanka & Samia, 2018). Three-tiered governments (federal, province, local) need to coordinate for enriching funds for inclusive education by mobilizing internal resources. The building playground and resources with accessibility in mind should flourish from the beginning academic session.

Technological Barrier

The inadequacy of necessary assistive devices for effective teaching in the classroom to fulfil the diverse needs of learners refers to the technological barrier (Mohamed, 2018). The technology-assisted pedagogy imparts knowledge in quick

and understandable patterns according to the needs and interests of learners. In this context, participant said:

> In this school, the teacher adopts the traditional approach to teaching. Lecture methods are often used in every class. The school lacks assistive devices such as screen readers, hearing aids, and communication boards that can help students with disabilities engage in learning and social activities

As the paradigm has shifted in the instructional techniques along the lines of technological advancement, the teacher has been practicing modern techniques in teaching. In these techniques, students are less engaged in classroom discourse. Modern assistive devices are poorly introduced in the school; traditional teaching techniques are overwhelmed throughout the class (Chambers, 2020). The feedback session is completely discouraged and some of the teachers are afraid of modern technology because of the less updated in this area. The school should manage the resources whatever is needed by mobilizing internal resources. In a similar argument, another participant said:

> Technology makes our learning easier and more meaningful for expected outcomes. The teacher may feel at ease with the use of technology-driven pedagogy. However, this school lacks setting online platform and educational software to accommodate children with visual, auditory and cognitive disabilities.

In the above quotation, the technology-driven pedagogy makes teachers use appropriate strategies for teaching. The student is engaged effectively in the teaching-learning activity of the classroom. Technology assists students in learning 21st-century skills to solve individual and societal problems authentically (Hersh & Mouroutsou, 2019). The students are actively involved in classroom activities by using appropriate assistive technology (Mohamed, 2018). In the present situation of the school, a techno-friendly environment is not smooth in practice. Due to financial limitations, most schools are unable to maintain techno techno-friendly environment for the accommodation of all types of students. To overcome this situation, the nation needs to invest an adequate amount to provide access to appropriate assistive technology.

Legislative Hurdles

Several policies and laws have been initiated concerning disability inclusion. In policy, it is provisioned that existing schools will be transformed into inclusive schools by equipping them with adequate resources like funds and materials (Gulzar & Bhat, 2019). But schools have not translated according till now in the new changed context of the country. Another participant said:

In our country, the enacted policy is less functional and inadequately implemented. The laws that exist to protect disability rights are not satisfactorily ensured due to several legislative barriers and poor vision. Weak enforcement can lead to insufficient access and support.

In this context, the present policy and act are better in the way of legislative support but ineffective implementation is still creating problems for ensuring the educational rights of children. The International Convention on the Rights of a Person with a Disability has strongly raised the issue of basic education as a fundamental right for children with disability (Kurowski et al., 2022). The legislative hurdles need to be addressed by effective collaboration within the community. The advocacy and policy implementation provide adequate funding for smooth accommodation (Genova, 2015). By recognizing and addressing these infrastructure barriers, we can create inclusive environments that support the full participation and development of children with disabilities.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore the perception of teachers about existing practice and emerging challenges they face while teaching students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom. Most of the participants highlighted that there are several challenges that the teacher face to create inclusive environment in the classroom. The physical and attitudinal barriers are major challenges that need to be mitigated from the institution. Creating welcoming environment for the children with disability by restructuring existing physical features is one of the essential prerequisite for ensuring inclusion. For successful implementation of legislative provisions, the initiated efforts and programs need monitoring by the local government and building up networks with the disability working organization. Additional efforts are necessary to expand global partnerships in the enhancement of inclusive education to address learning needs. Besides the governmental initiatives to implement the global commitment to inclusive education, the stakeholders (home, family, school, and disability-related organizations) need to perform an imperative role. It requires a profound commitment to implement inclusive education policy from the government level. The stakeholders are responsible for mutual collaboration for implementing strong commitment. The professional ethics and accountability of teachers are extremely important for ensuring right of children with disability to be educated. The consistent efforts and initiatives in policy development, teacher training and resource allocation are imperative to overcome the challenges and realize the full benefit of inclusive education.

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