

## Sightless Students and Inclusive Classroom: A Case of a Sightless Girl

*Giri Raj Upadhayay*

*giriraj2039@gmail.com*

*Lecturer in Curriculum and Evaluation Education*

*Butwal Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal*

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### Abstract

*This study focuses on the classroom practices of a school run by the principles of inclusive policy and its strategies to treat sightless students in the inclusive classroom. The study aimed at exploring the classroom conditions of inclusiveness in a diverse classroom context. In order to attain the objectives, a case study research method was employed in which the data was collected from poor and sightless students who were purposively selected. The required information was collected through interviews and the observation of classroom context. The thematic analysis approach was used to analyze and interpret the data. Accordingly, the recorded data was transcribed at first, then the codes were developed and then the codes were organized into the themes, and ultimately the themes were discussed with reference to the data from the interview and observation. The findings of the study entailed that the sightless student had difficulty to adjust herself in the classroom, she felt that the instructional strategy and the classroom setting was not inclusive as it was expected to be and the classroom was not inclusive though it said to be like that. The problematic students, especially sightless students felt a sort of discrimination in the teaching strategy of their teachers. The study concludes that though the policy of inclusive education and classroom is principally good, the implementation part is quite poor in our diverse classrooms.*

**Key Words:** *Sightless students, inclusive, participation, problematic students, teaching strategy*

### Introduction

All individuals are same from the perspective of social values and justice. Equal respect and justice should be given to all the individuals of the society considering their social importance. No one should be discriminated in terms of gender, race, cast, ethnicity, complexion, physical wellbeing, and religion. Instead, they should be treated equally. Social behavior of the individuals indicates the social, economic and cultural aspects of the social life. Educational sector is one of the social institutions. Social behavior has its impact

on educational institutions. The behaviors guided by the social activities and behaviors often create a sense of discrimination up on the students in schools. Such a discrimination often tends to result injustices in the opportunity of getting education to the children. There can be the situation of being out of school to many children because of the discrimination that they feel. Inclusive education can function as a means to get rid from the discrimination and injustices in education. Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded - not only children with disabilities, but speakers of minority languages too.

Inclusive systems value the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and allow diverse groups to grow side by side, to the benefit of all. Regarding inclusive education, the education bylaw states that every child has the right to quality education and learning (Education by law, 1971, p.4). The by law also states that the education based on regular schooling can facilitate the socially, economically, and geographically back warded people in nondiscriminatory ways. The education system should give equal space to the sightless, low vision, deaf, low audibility, autism, intellectual, handicapped people due to physical, intellectual and other reasons. The inclusive education system ought to respect everyone's needs and interests, including those of persons with varied qualities, interests, abilities, and requirements. Everyone has the right to learn and the education system should cater feasible environment to the abled and differently abled people (Education by law, 1971, p.4). The inclusive education asserts that all the students must be treated equally without causing discrimination in terms of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic and other aspects (UNESCO, 1994). "Students can learn together, they can adjust themselves being together" is the fundamental spirit of inclusive education. Thus, every child must be empowered in such a way that they could select meaningful opportunities, face the challenges, interact to each other based on the perplexing problems to them, and get equal opportunities to participate in internal and external environment. However, providing equal opportunity is the prerequisite to maximize their participation. Inclusive education system helps in creating and maximizing opportunities for the learners who are under the risk of dropping out of the school due to unfavorable situation as well as to those who are under access of education because of learning environment and support for learning (Inclusive Education Policy for the Handicapped, 2073, p. 1). Inclusive education sets equal learning opportunity to each student, as a result of which the students with specific need can get the opportunity in inclusive class. The students with different abilities can adjust, recognize themselves as individuals, feel as strong as others, and feel capable. Inclusive education also helps in bringing changes in learning abilities and enhance social capitals of the students. In the context of Nepal, different Acts and By-laws have been made to develop and implement

the concern of inclusive education. Looking from the perspective of by-law, under the section 3, Basic Rights and Responsibilities-article 18, we find the provisions made on Rights to Equality. Sub-article 3 of the Rights to Equality delineates that no one shall not be discriminated in the name of religion, complexion, caste, gender, physical situation, language or geography, ideology or any others like such in the use of basic law of the nation (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, p.9).

It has been seen that inclusiveness has been assured in legal provisions as it has been stated that no restriction has been made to form specific provisions for the protection, empowerment or development of the citizens of the nation in the constitution. According to the provision on Curriculum Framework (2063, p.38), "inclusive education refers to the education to understand each other, respect each other, be responsive on educational needs and be inclusive for the experience, interest and the values of all the children. Inclusive education has to address the concern of Human Right and Peace Education. Inclusive education emphasizes on paying specific attention to the children having specific needs, on making flexible calendar of school learning, on instructing the students in need basis, on localization of curriculum, and developing need-based curriculum in order to make curriculum inclusive. Similarly, inclusive education makes a call for providing access to all individuals who are beyond mainstream education even from the perspective of social inclusion. It also suggests providing informal education. Informal education has addressed inclusiveness and offered different programs to be useful for people having faced caste-specific, ethnic-specific, physical and linguistic problems. Informal education policy (2063, p.1) envisioned that access of informal education shall be extended for providing behavioral, intellectual and need-based knowledge, skills, and information to people of different age groups and classes based on their specific needs, stating that the programs are inoperative. The provision of rights related to education in the constitution of Nepal has ensured the fundamental rights for education to every child. It has made specific provisions for special needs children. So, it has been mentioned that the students being sightless, speechless, autism, and handicapped should be given the opportunity of education with residential facilities (Inclusive Education Policy for the Handicapped, 2073, p. 13).

Inclusiveness has been taken as a process of addressing the diverse needs of the learners. Inclusive education is supposed to be very vital in any education system as 'it brings all students together in one classroom and community, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses and seeks to maximize the potential of all students' (Lawrence & Belinda, 2019).It has been assumed that the major spirit of inclusive education is to enhance the participation of the students in learning process in order to reduce the depletion of students' enrollment inside and outside of the educational access of the students in education so as to include all in the mainstream education. The system is more important

because it 'enables children to be valued in their ways of knowing and experiencing the world and strives to engender their respect for others' knowledge's and experiences' (Baglieri, 2017, p.12).The more attention has been given to how students learn more rather than, what should be taught to them. However, in the context of Nepal, equal participation of the students has not been visible despite the policies for inclusive education. The problem is there in its implementation part in terms of providing equal opportunity. It has not been inclusive on the basis of social, cultural, linguistic, physical and other aspects though the provision has been made. Caste based discrimination is still prevalent in the society. There is discrimination because of economy. Due to physical disabilities, children do not have access to inclusive education. The children of HIV infections are not benefitted from the learning opportunity at schools. Though the teachers have inclusive thoughts and respect to the spirit of inclusiveness, the study on how they are implementing it in the classroom has not been made yet. How the concept and implementation of inclusive education is in practice? especially, how the sightless students have been experienced in the inclusive education? how they are adjusting themselves? what is their perception on inclusive classroom said to be holistic in its sense, and so on? are the concerns of study in context of inclusiveness in its meaning and function. The existing reality is not sufficient; thus, these aspects or concerns of inclusive education have been the matter of interest at present in the research works.

### **Objective of the study**

This study is basically aimed at finding out the existing situation of inclusiveness in a diverse classroom learning context. This study will also help improving the teaching learning situation in the Nepalese classrooms.

### **Research Questions**

This study was proceeded ahead on finding out the answer of the following research questions:

- How do the sightless and low vision students perceive inclusive classroom environment?
- How do they adjust themselves in the inclusive classroom? And,
- How do they perceive and understand themselves in the diverse classroom?

### **Method**

This study was entirely based on case study research design under the framework of qualitative research. Ary, Jccobs and Sorensen (2010) A case study is a type of ethnographic research study that focuses on a single unit, such as one individual, one group, one organization, or one program. The goal is to arrive at a detailed description and understanding of the entity (the "case") (p. 29). Mertens ( 2015), Case study research is an

investigative approach used to thoroughly describe complex phenomena, such as recent events, important issues, or programs, in ways to unearth new and deeper understanding of these phenomena (p.245).A comprehensive study of a social unit- be that unit person, a group, a social institution, a district, or a community is called a case study (Young, 1998, p. 247). A single unit is thoroughly investigated in this study. The chosen unit is studied in depth rather than breadth. When examining a case in its natural setting, personal records are considered a source. The qualitative, complex, and in-depth analysis of the case is the primary focus of the case study approach. In other words, the researcher closely examines the real life and the activities of the respondents being close to them. Creswell (2015, p. 465) state that the researcher seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the case by collecting multiple forms of data (e.g., pictures, scrapbooks, videotapes, and e-mails)

In this study, the researcher selected the sightless and low vision students from marginalized community studying at government schools. Purposive non-random sampling strategy was used to select the respondents. In-depth interview with the participants and the observation were used as the tools for data collection. The interview data was recorded by the use of recording device. The data from interview with compared to the data from observation in order to assure the reality of data. Note taking was used to record the data from the observation. The collected data were transcribed at first and then categorized and coded by creating group codes to develop the themes for the analysis. So, thematic analysis was used to analyze and interpret the data. The received data were linked to the related theories and further interpreted. The result of group behavior has been presented with the researcher's reflection.

## **Results and Discussion**

The themes were developed at first and the discussion was made in relation to the data and the related theories. The following sections include the themes and the discussion:

### **Different Existence, Different form of Understanding**

The students in the classroom are from diverse social and cultural contexts. Their behavior, concepts and perception can be different too as per the difference in culture. The knowledge is constructed on learners out of the language from culture and its understanding (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Schunk, 2012). The students display those behaviors as those they learn in the society and those that they learn from the culture rather than the education they get from schools. During the interview, the sightless and low vision students felt themselves being differently able and having physically and emotionally distinct personality compared to the students who are physically fit and strong. One of the respondents, in this regard said, "*we are different from others in many respects. We have to go to schools with support of the others, we feel that we are weak and others also think the same to us. The teachers asked others to help us. We cannot do the practical works*

*ourselves so the friends perceived us disable. I feel myself different from others because of my difficult conditions and physical disability.*" This statement shows that the differently able students are quite sensitive in their social adaptation ability, they are sensible in their reality, they feel humiliation, they have to face indirect insults from the friends, they need the grace of others and so on. All these consequences triggered them feel differently. The sightless and low vision students perceived themselves as having different situation. They presented them having different nature, behavior and abilities in the schools compared to other students.

### **Biased Classroom and Problems in Adjustment**

School should be equal to all the students. All individual students should get equal opportunity to learn. However, the data from the in-depth interview with the participants and the observation of their classroom learning reality, it has been seen that the learning materials managed and being availed in the classroom were only useful to physically wellbeing students. The laboratory and materials for practical activities were not appropriate to the sightless and low vision students. The existing reality of the classroom was not in favor of differently able students. Such a difference between the student-groups of the classroom creates gaps in learning opportunities to the needy students. The researcher observed biased behavior of the physically fit students towards the differently abled ones. The same was the situation in case of interaction and material support for learning. These evidences and facts entail that the learning materials managed in the classroom are only appropriate for physically wellbeing students. The differently abled students are disadvantaged in case of getting and using learning aids for the practical activities. No any specific provision has been made for the differently abled students. Whatever is availed in the classroom, availed for the physically fit students. The participation of differently abled students in practical activities was vulnerable. There was no common ground of respect to the differently abled students from their colleagues who were physically fit. During the interview one of the sightless students felt like this, "*the friends are not equally cooperative to us. They often insult us. They change the place of the materials and create difficulty to me to find them. They often insult me saying 'you are not able to see anything, what do you do'. The class is not friendly to me.*"

This sort of response from the sightless clarify that there is no equal environment for learning in the classroom; even the sightless students have difficulty in adjustment in the group. Though the Curriculum Framework (2063, p.38) defines inclusive education as the education to understand each other, respect each other, be responsive on educational needs and be inclusive for the experience, interest and the values of all the children, the reality of the classroom and the students' behavior towards the differently able students was not like that as expected in the definition. The classroom should respect equal rights, should provide equal access to the use of materials and create equal opportunity for learning if it is inclusive in reality. The data from the observation and interview showed biased behavior of friend-groups and carelessness of the school and the teacher in managing the learning

materials. The differently abled students were under the equal access of learning resources and even they faced discrimination. The data implies that the materials should be equally useful to all the students, and classroom learning situation must be friendly and impartial to the differently abled students.

### **Complexities in the Use of Learning Resources and Materials**

The learning resources and materials to support in students learning were not found relevant and usable to the sightless and low vision students. All the textbooks and reference books stacked in the library and in the classroom were only usable to the physically fit students. The respondents had a few books in Brail Script which is easier to use them. However, whatever they had were not sufficient to them. The differently abled students did not have get any specific tips for the use of learning resources available in the library. They did not find audio materials in library though they expected to have. It shows that the differently abled students were also under access of learning resources and materials. Though the constitution of Nepal (2072) states equal access in learning opportunity and learning resources, the reality of the classroom observed during the research is far different. The sightless students felt that they were deprived from affective learning resources, for example, audio and recorded materials. They could not use the available materials because of their physical deficiency. The materials in the classroom were not based on the need and interest of the sightless students, so the respondents felt that they are discriminated even in the access and use of learning resources and materials.

### **Difficulty in the Use of Facilities at School**

Students can get different facilities at school. They can use computer for learning, sports materials for exercise and entertainment, musical instruments for recreation, and so on. However, the sightless students were disadvantaged from the benefits of those facilities because of their physical health. During the interview, they said that they just heard about the facilities but unable to use, which makes them really disappointed. They felt difficulty to go to toilet and in the playground as they are not user-friendly to them. The road to playground and toilet was not easier to them. They expected access to the facilities with audio and constant support from the school assistant. Both the observation and interview data revealed that the sightless students had difficulty in the use of available facilities at school.

### **Discrimination in Teaching and Assessment System**

Specific needs learning has been introduced to create ease in learning to differently abled students. The training program has been implemented to the sightless students for their reading in Brail script. The training on Brail script to those needy students can have a positive impact on learning and it supports them in learning and adjustment. However, the situation of the classroom that the researcher observed was different. The sightless students did not get any training on Brail script neither they had relevant materials on Brail script except some books. In the interview, one of the respondents said, "I am not allowed to use

Brail script in the examination. I have to take support of other people to write an answer. The state has discriminated us in the name of inclusiveness because teaching and assessment system has not been inclusive yet. I think it is unfair to us to force writing with the support of others in the exam." This response indicates that the teaching and assessment system used in the classroom is not in favor of the sightless students. They felt being discriminated even in the inclusive classroom because they are not aloud to use the script of their ease in the exam. Thus, it has been found that there is discrimination in education system to the differently abled students.

### **Discrimination in Learning Methods and Student Support**

The method of teaching and learning matters a lot in students' achievement. Still, we have been using traditional methods and strategies in classroom learning to deliver the content and to support students in learning. From the observation of the classroom, it has been seen that the classroom instruction was made in equal basis to the students, however, no specific form of instruction was employed from the side of teacher to facilitate the learning of sightless and low vision students.

The strategies used in the classroom were not based on the need and interest of those students. The teacher used the methods to be only supportive for the students having normal learning abilities. The sightless students said that they never experienced the use of specific methods to support them. Here is a response of the informants during the interview: *"The learning environment of the inclusive classroom should be based on the need, interest, ability and the knowledge of the students. Though our class is said to be inclusive, we have not experienced specific benefit from the methods and strategies of our teachers. The methods that they have been using are discriminatory because we cannot learn in the same way as others do learn."* The response shows that the classroom was not inclusive in the use of methods and techniques. The teachers used holistic approach which is biased from the perspective of differently abled students. Regarding the supports provided to the students, one of the respondents said, *"except form verbal encouragement, I have not got any specific support to succeed my learning and complete the assigned task from the teachers. My teachers and friends feel hesitation to provide real support to me and sometimes they tried to be far from my request of support. They think that they would not have to support me, I find such a behavior too from them."* The excerpt from interview signifies that the teachers have not understood physical disability as a specific case of treatment. Though they said equal opportunity and support has been given to the students being irrespective to deformities. As the participants reported in the interview, their teachers had different perspective while behaving to the sightless students.

### **Collegial Support**

The classmates or fellow-friends can support the differently abled students in a number of ways. They can support them in learning, doing homework and participate actively in the activities. The respondents of this study said that they got support from their



friends. They friends cooperated them in different forms. Having a concern of how the differently abled students are supported from their friends in learning before and after entering to the school yard, the participants of the study reported that their classmates are friendly towards them. They helped them both in learning as well as in adjustment. Despite the support, the sightless students wanted to be independent in their own. They felt that, in most of the time, they had to struggle and manage themselves whatever is needed to them.

## **Findings**

The differently abled students, specially, sightless and low visioned students felt themselves as different individuals compared to the others because of the behavior of teacher and fellow friends in the classroom. They faced extreme difficulty in practical activities. Due to the lack of audio resources and other friendly learning materials to them, they had quite a different situation for learning. They perceived physical deformity as the cause of discrimination. They did not truly experience inclusiveness in the classroom, though it said to be inclusive. The classroom learning environment was not conducive to the sightless and low vision students. Unequal participation in classroom interaction and activities, lack of the support to study and write on Brail script and the use of holistic methods in teaching were the major things that create humiliation to them in learning. The differently abled students often felt being discriminated from the teacher and fellow friends. They were perceived as the character of grace not the independent and autonomous learners. They did not have access on suitable materials as per their physical deformity. The resources and materials availed in the classroom were not user-friendly to them. The materials that they had in Brail script supported them a lot in learning. The classrooms were not equipped with recorded and audio materials for the sightless students. They could get support from their friends and fellow learners but not got the support as expected. The school did not provide them with specific training in the effective use of Brail script, neither they received the specific form of treatment and tips for learning. They did not get a chance to take their examination in Brail script. They had to depend on others while writing for exam papers. The methods and strategies used by the teachers to teach them were not much support to them, they were neither inclusive nor effective for them to complete their learning tasks. The distinct personal ability was not fairly valued in the classroom. The help they received from friends was not enough because their friends often felt hesitation to help them. The sightless students felt that they are being discriminated in a number of ways though they thought that they were in an inclusive classroom.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of the study enabled the researcher to conclude that all the classrooms in our context are not inclusive in their true sense. The policy of inclusiveness has not been implemented. The proper implementation of the policy in a real practice shows the

effectiveness of doing something. Whatever has been mentioned in the policy, the effectiveness of which is entirely based on its practice. The students enrolled in the school should get equal opportunity and access to learning irrespective of physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cultural differences. Equal participation can develop a sense of mutual respect among the students in the classroom. The social adaptation and socialization of the students depend up on the love, care, and treatment that the students received. The differently abled students like sightless and low vision should be treated differently considering their difficulties. All forms of discrimination should be excluded. The students felt difficulty in learning, socialization and adjustment because of the discriminatory attitude and behavior of the teachers and fellow friends. The teaching learning and assessment system has not been as friendly as expected for sightless students. The provisions made in the constitution (2072) and in the curriculum framework (2063) have not been put into the practice for creating ease in learning of differently abled students.

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