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Lived Experience of Visual Impaired Children on Learning Opportunities and Challenges in Mainstream Classroom Settings

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Abstract

Education is a fundamental right of every child, and inclusive education focuses on accommodating students with special needs, including those who are visually impaired, by integrating them into mainstream classrooms. This paper explores how visually impaired children learn and interact with their sighted peers in an inclusive classroom setting. The study employs a phenomenological approach with a qualitative design to gather narratives about the learning experiences of visually impaired children. Interviews were conducted with purposefully selected bachelor-level students and teachers. The study revealed that peer support for visually impaired children was lower than anticipated. Additionally, teachers were perceived as not providing sufficient attention and care to these students. Despite this, visually impaired students expressed satisfaction with the opportunities afforded to them in this less-managed inclusive environment, as it offered them a better educational experience compared to traditional settings.

Keywords: *visually impaired, inclusive classroom, learning experiences, Nepal*

Introduction

Globally, the history of inclusive education recognizes education as a fundamental human right, particularly following the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This declaration asserts that every individual has the right to learn, emphasizing that educational systems should be tailored to meet individual

needs. Children with visual impairments can learn effectively in school, provided that the school environment is supportive and accommodating.

Several key documents further reinforce this commitment to inclusive education. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes the importance of inclusive practices in education. The Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1981) all advocate for free and compulsory primary education for all children. These documents highlight the obligation to develop secondary education, ensure equitable access to higher education, and provide basic education for individuals who have not completed primary education.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) articulates the right to education, emphasizing the need to uphold its four core principles: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, and the right to life, survival, and development to the maximum extent possible. The convention encourages an understanding of the right to education in terms of universality, participation, respect, and inclusion. Thus, the right to education is a fundamental component of inclusive education, which can be assessed through the framework of the 4As: Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, and Adaptability. These concepts are especially significant for children with visual impairments. Education is a powerful tool for all children, and providing a supportive environment can greatly facilitate the learning process for those with visual impairments.

Historically, individuals with disabilities faced severe discrimination and exclusion. In ancient times, many disabled individuals were sentenced to death at birth, and those who survived were often segregated from their communities. By the 16th century, figures such as Luther and John Calvin suggested that individuals with intellectual disabilities were possessed by evil spirits, leading to practices that inflicted mental and physical pain in attempts to exorcise these spirits (Thomas, 1957). Consequently, people with disabilities were marginalized and excluded from society.

Over time, perceptions began to shift, though attitudes varied widely across cultures. In some societies, people with disabilities were entirely rejected, while in others, they were viewed as outcasts or economic burdens. In more progressive contexts, some were tolerated or even granted respected status, allowing them to participate to the fullest extent of their capabilities (Hanks and Hanks, 1948). However, until the 19th century, students with disabilities were largely excluded from formal education. It was only in the 19th century that individuals with disabilities began to gain access to education in segregated schools.

Beginning in the 1970s, new policies were adopted to ensure educational opportunities for young people with disabilities. The approach shifted towards integrating these students into ordinary schools and “mainstreaming” them in subjects they could manage, while also establishing special education classes to address their unique needs. However, this model often placed the burden on the child to adapt to the school environment rather than encouraging the school to adapt to the child's needs (Will, 1985). Later, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 further emphasized the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classes, paving the way for educational opportunities in inclusive settings.

In my review of both national and international educational policies and provisions related to students with disabilities, the literature consistently emphasizes the importance of education without discrimination. However, it often falls short of providing specific guidelines for educating visually impaired students effectively.

Education is a fundamental right from the moment an individual is born. Every child in society, whether typically developing or with special needs, should have access to education. As stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.” Schools play a crucial role in providing education to all children in society.

In Nepal, there are three types of schools for children with special needs: special schools, integrated schools, and mainstream schools. This research focuses on mainstream schools, where students of various backgrounds and abilities come together to learn. Mainstream classrooms reflect diversity in caste, gender, ethnicity,

disability, language, and economic conditions, leading to a range of needs and interests among students.

Inclusive education involves integrating differently-abled students into regular classrooms, making differentiation critically important to address the academic and social development of all students within the same environment. Visually impaired children represent one group of special needs students who face various challenges, including attention problems, memory difficulties, academic deficiencies, issues with receptive and expressive language, social interaction problems, and challenges related to orientation and mobility. These challenges necessitate a supportive educational setting.

Research has shown that students often feel pressured to learn through a medium of instruction that primarily caters to the majority group in inclusive classrooms (Thapa & Adamson, 2017). This study analyzes the experiences of visually impaired students in general education settings from their perspectives, focusing on their learning experiences in inclusive classrooms.

Mangal College, located in Kirtipur, enrolls a few students with varying abilities each year, including those who are visually impaired. This raises several key questions: What teaching processes are implemented in inclusive schools? How can children with special needs and their typically developing peers learn together effectively? Do visually impaired students achieve learning outcomes comparable to those of their sighted peers? What challenges do these children encounter during the teaching and learning process? What difficulties do teachers face in facilitating an inclusive classroom? How do visually impaired students feel about their educational experiences?

This paper seeks to answer the central question: How do visually impaired children learn and interact with general children in an inclusive classroom? By exploring these questions, this study aims to enhance our understanding of the learning achievements of visually impaired children and the principles of inclusive education, tracing its origins and practices worldwide. The findings will also contribute to formulating policies and programs in Nepal that promote the inclusion of differently-abled students in mainstream education.

Objectives

This paper aims to explore the learning experiences of visually impaired students in inclusive classroom settings, focusing on teaching methods, learning achievements, and the challenges faced by these students.

Research Methodology

To achieve the objectives, the study employed a qualitative research design. The unit of analysis is visually impaired students, with a specific emphasis on their lived experiences related to learning achievements and other relevant aspects. Data were collected through interviews, which were then qualitatively analyzed and categorized into various themes.

The methodological approach for exploring the learning experiences, achievements, and related challenges faced by visually impaired students is grounded in phenomenology. This philosophical framework posits that a better understanding of learning and performance is fostered within effective and supportive environments, such as inclusive classrooms.

An inclusive classroom setting facilitates the ability of visually impaired students to work, learn, and perform more effectively. Mangal Multiple College, located in Kirtipur, was purposefully selected as the study site because it includes visually impaired students learning alongside their sighted peers in an inclusive environment. Faculty members involved in teaching, as well as visually impaired students, were also selected purposively. Three students and two teachers engaged in inclusive classroom instruction participated in the study, with their experiences and interests being assessed prior to the interviews.

This study based on phenomenological qualitative research design. Phenomenology seeks to explore the lived experiences of participants and analyze the common essences of those experiences related to a specific phenomenon. Through this phenomenological lens, the study aims to capture the lived experiences of three visually impaired students studying at the bachelor's level as well as two teachers who are teaching in bachelor level. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the interviews. Utilizing a developed interview guideline, in-depth interviews were carried out.

After the interviews, the transcriptions were created and thematically categorized under various themes. The narratives collected for each theme were described and interpreted using narrative analysis. This article primarily draws on the interviews conducted with participants and incorporates the author's own experiences for interpretation and validation. Individual interviews were conducted by the author with the selected participants. While details of all participants, including the author, are included in the study; care has been taken to maintain anonymity. In total, the experiences of five individuals, including the author, are represented in this study.

Result and Discussion

This section presents an analysis of data concerning the inclusive classroom setting and the learning achievements of visually impaired students. The analysis is organized into major themes: Inclusive Classroom, Learning Environment, Opportunities and challenges of learnings. Based on the narratives of interviewed students and teachers involved in inclusive classrooms, the following analysis and discussion are presented.

Inclusive Education: Opportunity and challenges

Inclusive education aims to create a supportive learning environment for students with special needs. To achieve this, an inclusive classroom setting is essential. Participants in this study reported facing several challenges during their learning experiences. These challenges encompassed both educational and behavioral aspects, impacting visually impaired students both at home and in the classroom. One participant, a bachelor-level student, stated, "*There are educational opportunities and challenges for visually impaired children learning in an inclusive classroom setting. Teaching pedagogy and physical facilities have made it easier for us to learn what is taught in the classroom*" (Participant 1, interview, 2080-03-22).

The teaching methods employed are generally designed for the needs of sighted students, requiring visually impaired students to adapt to the same pedagogical approaches. As a result, they are navigating and coping with the traditional methods of classroom instruction.

Inappropriate Physical facilities

The classroom is relatively spacious, allowing for movement; however, the furniture is not specialized for visually impaired students, which poses challenges when

navigating the space. Additionally, the washroom and canteen facilities are unsuitable for children with visual impairments. The classroom itself suffers from insufficient lighting and inadequate ventilation.

One participant highlighted the difficulties they face: *“It is a bit difficult switching rooms every day; I risk hurting myself or others due to the unmanageable seating arrangement. The physical facilities for visually impaired students are not very satisfactory”* (Participant 1, 2023). This statement underscores the inadequacy of the available physical facilities, which are not designed to be disability-friendly.

Another participant echoed this sentiment: *“There is less space in the classroom to move around, and there are bumps here and there outside on the grounds”* (Participant 3, interview, 2080-03-22). This suggests that the environment does not meet the expectations of students with special needs.

In discussions with teachers, it was noted that gradual improvements are being made in response to new policies and practices at the local level.

Difficulties in Orientation and mobility

Orientation and mobility training is crucial for individuals who are visually impaired, as it teaches them to travel safely and effectively through their environments. These skills are essential for visually impaired students to navigate their surroundings independently and efficiently.

At Mangal College, however, there is no assistance available for visually impaired students regarding orientation, mobility, or personal hygiene. All participants reported difficulties in moving from one location to another. They rely on white canes to aid their navigation. One participant shared, *“In the basic level, it wasn't difficult for us because our peers were very helpful, but in higher levels, they don't provide as much support and are more selfish”* (Participant, interview, 2080-03-23).

This statement highlights the ongoing challenges faced by visually impaired students in receiving peer support, which is crucial for their learning effectiveness.

Complexity in Brail's teaching

Braille teaching is a fundamental tool for children with visual impairments. In the early stages, learning Braille can be particularly challenging for these students. They use a slate and stylus to write text in Braille, enabling them to read independently.

According to their experiences, they first learn numbers and digits in Braille before progressing to languages such as Nepali and English. Once they become proficient in the Braille script, they can complete most academic tasks on their own, often benefiting from peer learning as well. This collaborative learning approach provides significant support and opportunities for visually impaired children.

However, without Braille instruction, education for visually impaired students would be nearly impossible. One participant shared, *“At first, it was very difficult for me to learn Braille. I even dropped out of school for a year at the primary level. Then I returned to school the following year. Now it is easy for me to write in Braille”* (Participant B, interview, 2080-4-15).

This statement highlights a significant barrier to continuing education for visually impaired students: course materials are predominantly printed in standard text, making them inaccessible to those who cannot read it.

Lack of peer support and Classroom interaction

Peer support is a crucial aspect of an inclusive classroom, especially for students with visual impairments. These students rely on their peers to help them navigate the challenges they face both in and out of the classroom. However, there are times when peers do not provide the necessary support, which presents a significant challenge for visually impaired children in an inclusive setting.

One participant, referred to as 'C', expressed this feeling: *“During primary school, my friends would sit with me, help me, and support me. Nowadays, they tend to avoid me and no longer offer their support. As a result, I feel lonely, and I find myself not wanting to come to college anymore”* (Participant C, interview, 2080-05-20). This highlights the importance of consistent peer support for visually impaired students in fostering a sense of belonging and engagement in their educational environment.

Classroom interaction is a crucial component of effective classroom management. Positive interaction can foster a supportive learning environment; however, some students feel isolated in this context. One participant expressed feelings of loneliness, noting that most teachers do not adequately address the needs of students with disabilities. He mentioned the lack of engagement in the classroom, saying, *“There is no talking, no waiting during the writing process, and silent reading, which makes me feel alone.”*

Additionally, Mangal College does not have a separate evaluation process for visually impaired students. These students are assessed using the same criteria as their sighted peers, which can be problematic. As a result, the current state of classroom management for visually impaired students at Mangal College is less than satisfactory.

Difficulties in Time management

During the interviews, respondents highlighted challenges related to time management. In an inclusive classroom setting, where various types of learners are present, visually impaired students often struggle with the time required for writing tasks. They lack the flexibility to complete their notes at a pace that suits their needs, forcing them to manage their time more effectively than their sighted peers.

As a result, these students frequently seek assistance from their classmates; however, they often find it difficult to receive support since their peers are also focused on completing their own tasks.

Future plan and Expectation

Visually impaired students aspire to secure meaningful job opportunities and establish their independence in the future. They seek to become self-sufficient and less reliant on others. One participant expressed this ambition:

“In the future, I want to be a good teacher or have a government job. I am primarily preparing for the Lok Sewa Aayog. In our society, people often do not accept individuals like us, or those who may lack certain abilities. Therefore, I aim to become a great person and contribute my knowledge to my community” (Participant 2, Interview, 2080-6-4).

These students do not wish to be marginalized as human beings; they desire to be treated like everyone else, regardless of the discriminatory behaviors they often encounter. Some participants even expressed a desire to become accomplished singers in the future.

The campus is often constructed as an ancient seat of learning rather than an inclusive environment. Nevertheless, the initiatives focused on inclusive education and classroom practices on this campus are both encouraging and commendable in the context of special needs education practices in Nepal.

Conclusions

This study found that the current physical facilities at Mangal College are inadequate for visually impaired students, and the classroom management is not optimally supportive. However, in comparison to traditional classroom settings, the inclusive classroom environment offers better learning opportunities for visually impaired students. For visually impaired children, peer support and Braille instruction are particularly crucial. Key components of effective education for special needs children include teaching materials, instructional methods, peer support, teacher behavior, and overall classroom management. Despite these components being essential, participants expressed that the current conditions are still poorly managed. The learning experiences of visually impaired students do not meet their expectations when compared to their sighted peers in the same classroom.

At the same time, it is vital for all students to become aware of their individual learning styles, as this is a fundamental step toward achieving self-sufficiency in learning. The campus is often constructed as an ancient seat of learning rather than an inclusive environment. Nevertheless, the initiatives focused on inclusive education and classroom practices on this campus are both encouraging and commendable in the context of special needs education practices in Nepal.

Based on the conclusions of this paper, several recommendations can be made for further improvement. This type of research benefits policymakers, researchers, teachers, stakeholders, and visually impaired students studying in inclusive classroom settings. The curriculum should be flexible to accommodate the needs of special needs children. Teachers must not neglect visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms. We can help ensure their future success by providing appropriate education for all. Furthermore, learning environments should be supportive and productive for all types of learners, and every school must be openly accessible to children with visual impairments.

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