

SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN ADOPTING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN INTEGRATED CLASSROOMS OF NEPAL

*Nam Raj Neupane, Ram Chandra Giri**

Lecturer, Central Department of Education, Kirtipur, TU.

**Corresponding author: rcgiri599@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of teachers of integrated schools in adopting inclusive practices in the classrooms. It was carried out by selecting three integrated schools of two districts, Kathmandu and Kavre, by purposive sampling method. Three teachers from each school were selected by purposive sampling method. The interview guidelines were prepared and got reviewed from a special needs education expert to maintain its reliability, and then administered to the participants. The study found that teachers have been experiencing low self-awareness on teaching students with disabilities. The study also showed a serious lacking in knowledge and skills in teachers and their deviated perceptions towards inclusive practice. Moreover, the study revealed that the school administration can play vital role in developing inclusive culture inside the school and also responsible to provide training to the teachers. Therefore, teachers being the key player in school system, need professional development and exposure to enhance knowledge and skills to handle students with special needs in integrated classrooms.

Keywords: integrated school - inclusive practices - teachers' experiences - knowledge and skill

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is the tri-polar process where there is an interaction among teacher, students, and curriculum to achieve envisaged educational goals. In educational process, policies are inputs which provide the way about how the public aspirations are translated into educational goals and the way goals are achieved (Neure 2014). Therefore, teachers are at the center of educational process and can act as game changer in educational reform

process. In Integrated school education, teachers are in crucial position to understand students with disabilities and their educational rights. Integrated education teachers should know how to blend the policies with existing curriculum to achieve the goal of quality education through inclusiveness to maximum extent.

The historical journey of education for students with disabilities has transformed from special education to inclusive education in Nepal in short span. During the transformation process, the educational approach and practices to teach students with disabilities underwent through ups and downs. Number of policies formulated, many published and unpublished reports purposed different provisions for developing special needs education in Nepal. As a result, 33 special schools and 22 integrated schools (MOE 2018) were established and are providing services for students with disabilities in Nepal.

Policies are the important guidelines to meet needs and aspirations of the people of every society. Policies are the decisions taken by the government or choice of the government to do or not to do the particular task (Cooper *et al.* 2004). Policy formulation is the value laden process that authoritatively allocates the values in the societies. Teachers in the education system are the agents for implementing policies in the society thus can play important role on establishing the values associated with (Barbour 2008). Every country in the world formulates own policies to manage educational affairs. Nepal is no exception for this and has formed policies on different sectors like education, security, foreign affairs, financing, etc. Special education policies are examples of such policies which target people with disabilities and other people of the society. According to Heward (2012), the primary objectives of the special/inclusive education policies are to achieve educational goals by bringing positive changes in teaching learning process. Thus, policies play important role in shaping future trend and quality of education of the nation. This is equally valid for developing teachers' competencies for effective classroom delivery to ensure quality education (NCED 2015). Hence, teachers are the key agents particularly for implementing educational policies of the country with an intention of improving educational quality.

Providing Inclusive education for the students with disabilities is one of the most striking issues in the contemporary world (Baglieri & Shapiro 2012). The countries around the globe have been expressing their commitments to provide quality education for students with

disabilities through various conventions, declarations, and protocols. All the international and national commitments have highlighted the roles and responsibilities of teachers for quality education. National Center of Educational Development, NCED (2015) stated that teachers should be aware of right based approach including human rights, child rights, and the concept of 'Education for All'. They are expected to accept education as a fundamental right and illustrate their behavior in accordance with existing policies, laws, social values, and norms. In this spirit, teachers must be knowledgeable of existing policies along with suitable teaching learning activities for students with disabilities in the classrooms. While translating policies into practice, teachers generally use curriculum, appropriate teaching materials, resources, strategies, and well prepared plans. In this regard, according to Gindis (2003), teachers are expected to equip with knowledge, skills and dispositions for dealing students with special needs. Sometimes teachers may feel burden to follow inclusive approach in integrated settings as this demand additional efforts in teaching learning activities. In this situation, teachers can refuse to work with students with disabilities or can substantially modify policies (Cooper et al. 2004) they dislike, such as curriculum reforms.

These facts indicate that some teachers for example, may be unfamiliar about inclusive education and sometimes they may not do those activities intended by educational policy due to the lack of motivation (Liasidou 2015). If school teachers do not understand the needs and nature of students with disabilities, then effective teaching learning activities in integrated classrooms cannot become effective.

For effective transformation of curricular goal into practice, teachers have to be informed about the existing educational policies and they must know instructional strategies well to make the intents of policies real in classroom situations (Croll *et al.* 1994). In this context, it is expected that teachers along with school administration need to work on implementing inclusive education policies to develop their professional competencies and manage integrated classrooms in the inclusive way. Therefore, study posits the following research questions such as: How do teachers perceive the students with disabilities? Are teachers aware of the inclusive education and its basic premises? What are their perceptions towards inclusion? How do teachers feel on practicing inclusive teaching learning approach in integrated setting?

METHODS

The study is based on the qualitative research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln 2005) and is followed by descriptive research design (Wiersma & Jurs 2009). The study provides a comprehensive description on the phenomena under study. Three integrated schools, 2 from Kathmandu districts and 1 from Kavre district were selected by purposive sampling method. These schools were selected as having better arrangements for students with disabilities in integrated setting. All the teachers of integrated schools of Nepal were considered as population of the study. Three teachers from each sample schools were selected (Merriam & Tisdell 2016) on the basis of their work experiences. Teachers having teaching experience of more than 5 years in integrated classroom settings were selected as the respondents. Thus, altogether 9 respondents were involved in study process. Participants were the teachers for teaching students with visual impairment along with their normal counterparts in integrated setting.

Semi-structured interview schedules were prepared and reliability of the research tool was maintained by receiving tools' review with two experts of special needs education. The interview schedules were administered so as to collect in-depth information on sharing experiences of respondent teachers as guided by the research tool. Prior to the interview process, permissions were obtained from head teachers and participant teachers. The whole information was obtained after administering series of face to face interviews of the teachers during their leisure periods. Additional information was collected from documents' review which were primarily the government's plans and policies related to special needs/ inclusive education. Triangulation method was also adopted to ensure the reliability and validity of the information. All the information gathered during the research process were transcribed, sorted out, and organized (Cohen *et al.* 2007). The collected data were edited, classified, and then themes were generated (Creswell 2012) which formed the basis for analysis and interpretation to draw meaningful results.

RESULTS

Teachers stand at the front line in any educational setting while implementing curriculum to achieve curricular objectives and goals. In this sense, their 'live experiences' in implementing education carry a great meaning. The teachers and head teachers were very enthusiastic in sharing their experiences some of these experiences were positive while some were negative, some of their views show them optimistic and some of their

views were pessimistic. However, their experiences provide impetus for implementing special needs and inclusive education policies in the days to come. In the study process, schools are coded as “SA, SB, and SC” and teachers as “T1, T2 ...T9.” The data gathered from the respondents were categorized to sort out and generate the following themes:

Low awareness level on inclusive education

Most of the participants were found unaware about the existence of Inclusive Education Policy and they are not oriented about inclusive practice in schools. Inclusive education policy carries the message that teachers are the most responsible persons to integrate children with disability in the regular classroom (Kearney & Kane 2006). Many of the teachers had heard about inclusive education related practices as a new practice in education sector. A participant who taught in the same school for five years said: *“I have heard that there has been a new policy called “Inclusive Education Policy” but I have not found it yet. Actually, I am searching for that”* [SA/T2]. From the above statement it is clear that front line policy implementers are still unknown about the policy which is being operated in schools for past few years. The other teacher also had the similar statement; *“The policy documents are ahead of the inclusive education practice; we need more training on practicing inclusive education”* [SB/T4]. It is unlikely that many teachers of the integrated schools are still unaware of the inclusive education policy and the way to implement it in the classrooms. Teachers were expected orientation from the concerned organizations to make them able to translate inclusive education policy into practice.

Narrow understanding of inclusive education

Teachers’ general understanding of inclusive education implies great significance on implementing inclusive education policy. The effectiveness of policy implementation depends upon how far the teachers have understood inclusive education. Teachers were provided narrow view of inclusive education. This is an excerpt from one respondent: *“Inclusive education is a process of teaching all students in a same classroom whether they are abled or disabled, talented or dull, rich or poor etc.”* [SC/T8]. This statement reveals a narrow view of the respondent on inclusive education. The respondent’s understanding of inclusive education is limited to ensure the access of all students in the classroom. It was seen as only placing students together in same classroom and teaching in a traditional way. Their general understanding of inclusion in education is just keeping students together, and nothing more than that. Another participant said; *“Inclusive*

education is a type of education where disabled students are allowed to study with other students and teachers are well known about how to teach them together" [SA/T3]. This statement clearly provides the level of understanding about the concept of inclusive education among teachers of integrated schools. Teachers need training on inclusive education approach and inclusive education policy.

Negative perceptions towards persons with disability

Teachers' perception towards students with disability plays a vital role in success of the inclusive education approach in classroom settings. Negative perception of the teachers is a serious issue in practicing inclusion in integrated classrooms. Most of the teachers came up with the view that inclusion in education appeared with a lot of challenges to teach students with disabilities together with other students (Ainscow 2012). Teachers said that they are helping students with disabilities without discriminating them. One of the teachers said:

I have never discriminated disabled students. I am giving equal time and love to all the students. But, yes it is difficult to teach disabled student as compared to other students. Other students' performance can be influenced as they can be disturbed by students with disabilities. It would be better if such students are taught in the separate settings [SC/T7].

Through this statement, teacher showed his willingness to teach children with disability in segregated settings. His claim was that regular teachers do not know about how to teach student with disability inside a classroom along with their counterparts. Also, his perception towards students with disabilities is not positive. Another teacher told; *"I give some extra time to students with disability but it is difficult to provide enough attention to them because of time limitation and a large students number inside the classroom"* [SB/T5]. The verbatim of the teacher indicates that despite of his willingness to teach student with special needs inside his classroom, it is difficult to help students with disabilities in properly in integrated settings. This indicates ineffective teaching learning practice happening inside the integrated classroom. Hence, the perceptions of some of the teachers are not positive towards students with disability to include in the integrated classroom together with non-disabled peers.

Reluctance of school administration

Participants had an opinion that due to reluctance of school administration, efforts of inclusive education practices have been affected. They opined that school administration is reluctant to perform identification

and screening of children with special needs. School administration is seemed unaware about how to implement effective inclusive education. Teachers believed that school administration should take responsibilities to manage, negotiate, and establish network among the teachers, parents and school administration to help the students with special needs effectively. In this regard, one of the teachers said: *“We had series of discussion with the school administration about the problems of students with disabilities. But the administration was reluctant to adopt measures showing resource scarcity including human resources”* [SA/T1]. Teachers’ opinion was clear and viewed school management reluctant on taking measures for students with disabilities. The teacher’s statement indicated that school administration is not proactive for adopting systematic approach on identifying, screening and diagnosing the students with special needs.

Limitations of skills and knowledge

Teachers teaching in integrated schools felt great need of knowledge and skills in the area of inclusive education which only can make them as a successful teacher in inclusive education settings. Skills, knowledge, and disposition for understanding and addressing the needs of children with disabilities are crucial to be a teacher for children with disabilities in any type of schools. The study result revealed that still there are several teachers who do not have skills and knowledge in desired level. They do not have additional skills and qualification than general teachers. They had opinion that better training and education in the area of inclusive education would help them to work proficiently in inclusive settings. One of the teachers said;

Not only me, if you see, there are many teachers like me who do have subject specific qualification and training but do not have any training or experiences of teaching in integrated classrooms. You know the system of education in Nepal, how much burden does a subject teacher has. My concern is to be perfect and confident in my own subject and I did the same. But how can I know the science of teaching and how to treat disabled students separately since I have not received any training or other instructions yet? Other teachers are also doing the same..... (Laughter), what to do, we don’t have other suitable options [SC/T9].

From the above statement it is noticeable that teacher recruitment process in integrated schools is without specific norms. General school teachers are sent to the integrated schools and when they encounter students with disabilities inside the classroom, they are confused on how to address

the instructional needs of such students. This is the case in other schools too. Another teacher told her experience as;

“When I entered the classroom with normal and disabled students together, I was in complete confusion about how to begin teaching. Later on, I am habituated with them; although I haven't taken any formal training for managing and teaching such an integrated classroom yet “[SB/T6].

These statements are the representative narratives of majority of teachers who teach in integrated schools of Nepal. Teachers' performance is expected from their skills, Knowledge and their traits in the workplace which can be easily seen inside the classroom. Graduates majoring in special needs education are increasing but yet to be recruited in such schools.

Lack of professional development opportunities

Teachers' professional competencies is the key to succeed in any type of classroom but the teachers of the study area were not satisfied with their present status of professional development. Teacher preparation or teacher professional development in inclusive education refers to a process of preparing teachers to take charge of the inclusive classrooms where students with disabilities and non-disabled students study together (Acedo 2008). Professional development is the process of enhancing professional competencies i.e. knowledge and skills on areas of inclusion effectively inside a classroom. In Nepal, teacher preparation is generally done by providing pre-service and in-service training. Respondent teachers were not provided with such training on appropriate scale. One of the teachers said;

I did practice teaching during my bachelor's degree study as a compulsory requirement of the degree; this was the only pre-service practice I am exposed with. Regarding in-service training, I had taken a package of teacher training which was related to my subject teaching but not covered with the inclusive pedagogy and psychology of students with disabilities [SC/T7].

The teacher's response indicates that teachers lack practical skills on handling an integrated classroom in an inclusive way. Therefore, teachers felt they do not have enough self-confidence to teach in an integrated classroom effectively and to address needs of all students. In the same vein, another teacher stated;

“Teachers like me who teach in integrated classroom deserve trainings for effective teaching. Pre and in-service training is also essential for our professional development. We need to participate in seminars, workshops

related to inclusive education. Sending a teacher to a school is not enough for quality education; teachers' capacity should be equally developed" [SB/T5].

Teacher's above statement indicates the reality of professional development opportunities in Nepalese schools. This is also indicator of how the inclusive education practice has been carried out in the field. Recruitment of the qualified teachers provided with enough professional development opportunities can only enhance the learning in an integrated classroom.

DISCUSSIONS

An effective teaching learning is possible only when teachers are motivated and are highly professional in their job related to instructional activities. Teachers' positive experiences in the school are another condition for making better inclusive environment. The study revealed that teachers' awareness on inclusive education was found low. Teachers must have familiar with the inclusive education policy so that they can prepare themselves for implementing the policy (Kearney & Kane 2006). For this, it is important for teachers to get opportunity to receive training on inclusive practices in school is generally a big concern (Florian 2008). The finding revealed that teachers had a lot of variegated responses regarding the concept of inclusive education. Their opinions were coming in the line with the sense of inadequate understanding of inclusive education policies and practices which is not sufficient to carry out in classroom. They even did not get the point of departure of special education to inclusive education (Valeo 2009) because their notion of inclusion was more related to special education than inclusive education. Teachers also stated that school administration is not adequately supportive for inclusive practices. Importantly, school administration is also very little aware of inclusion theories and its philosophies. School should take initiation to develop a culture of inclusion and manage to identify and screen the students with disabilities. It is equally important to manage resources in the school (Farrel 2012). The lack of skills and knowledge were also reflected during responses of the participants. Teachers with sufficient knowledge, skills and understanding of inclusive education would help them translating inclusive education policy into practice in real sense (Deku & Ackah 2012). Therefore, skills and knowledge limitations put the practices in constraints considerably in the development of inclusionary practice. The skills and knowledge of a teacher is the product of his own efforts and training he/she receives from the external sources. Generally pre-service training, in-

service training, and refresher courses are provided in Nepal (NCED 2009) for the professional development of teachers. Teachers of the study area showed their dissatisfactions over government for depriving them from receive trainings in a line of inclusive education. Therefore, the study has highlighted that teachers experienced that they lack necessary skills in managing integrated classrooms setting for inclusive practice which has been a significant constraint for effective implementation of inclusive education policy in Nepal.

CONCLUSION

Teachers of integrated schools of Nepal revealed their experiences regarding adopting inclusive education practices in their respective schools. The study was focused on finding teachers' experiences in some selected area like awareness, and knowledge and skills, teachers' perception, professional development, and notion of school management towards inclusion. Teachers' were teaching with limited knowledge and skills for teaching in inclusive method. Their awareness on disability and inclusive education were found inadequate to practice inclusive education. However, their perceptions towards students with disabilities are found positive in general whereas the school management had some limitations. The professional development of the teachers is not properly planned and administered; due to which practicing inclusive education in integrated setting has become a challenging job.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was primarily focused to investigate experiences of teachers of integrated schools in adopting inclusive education practice in integrated classrooms. The intent of the Inclusive Education Policy for People with Disabilities 2017 is still existed in the country. There is a shift in paradigm from special to inclusive education which is reflected in the education policies formulated time and again. In this context, education for the students with disabilities has been a growing concern for many governmental and non-governmental organizations that are showing deep concern in the issues of students' inclusion in classrooms. Translating inclusive education policy into practice needs teachers' professional competencies and positive experiences. The study revealed the experiences of integrated school teachers practicing inclusiveness in integrated setting. So, this study is implacable for teachers, school administrators, and people

working in special/integrated/inclusive education area for government and non-governmental organizations across the country.

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