

## **Paradoxes Experienced in Embracing Inclusiveness among Students: Stories from Progressive Schools of Kathmandu Valley**

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### **Abstract**

*The discourse of inclusion in education is getting a great emphasis both in international and national arena these days. Talking especially about Nepal, with the rising voice for paradigmatic shift in education, the number of progressive schools is increasing which are in rigor of preparing a more democratic learning environment for teaching learning. However, since the discourse of inclusion in education demands addressing different needs of learners, inclusion meant to one might not be so for another. Hence, this paper aims at unraveling paradoxes the school leaders have experienced in course of practising inclusion among students. In this course, two school leaders from two different institutional progressive schools were selected purposively as research participants while Kathmandu valley was selected as research site. The study embraced narrative inquiry as research methodology whereas interview was used as method of data collection. Focusing basically on the areas of integrating cultural diversity and learning abilities of students, data were collected from the participants in the form of narratives for which open ended questions were used. From the study, it was revealed that inclusion tended to create in one way might result in exclusion in the other way. The basic paradoxes the school leaders narrated were regarding how to preserve and celebrate cultural sensitivity of each group in class and how to address students with different learning abilities without making them feel segregated in any way. Moreover, it even provided me an insight that inclusion in education has to be understood in contextual manner rather than generalizing it based on what the state says or how state defines.*

**Keywords:** culturally responsive, progressive schools, segregation, social inclusion

### **Introduction**

The paper aims at exploring the paradoxes experienced by the school leaders of Kathmandu Valley who have been practising to ascertain inclusiveness in their progressive school settings. Lining up with the notion developed by Dewey of drifting

away from centralizing teaching-learning to teachers (Dewey, 1915), a more democratic school setting is expected at present, where the teachers are supposed to get guided by the idea that different learners may need different kind of learning support since what one thinks will work for one may not work for the other (Khasawneh et al., 2014). These schools, commonly identified as progressive schools as articulated by Little (2013) draw their alignment to the promulgation in American Education, namely Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2001, also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In this sense, the concept of adopting Progressive Approach in Education (PAE) can be considered as an initiative made to ensure inclusion in academic setting. Since it supports identification of each individual possessing divergent cognitive abilities in main stream of academia (Gardener, 1983).

Discussing about the term inclusion, a layman may find it as an act of including where ‘including’ is perceived as being a part of something or being embraced into a whole (Abraham & Puri, 2004, p. 13). The notion of social inclusion, on the other hand, is often identified through ‘social justice ideology’ which incorporates the ideas about human rights, egalitarianism of opportunity, human dignity, and fairness to all (Gidley et al., 2010). At the same time, the discourse of inclusion is even understood with contrast to the discourse of *social exclusion* that draws its extraction to the policy discourse in France in the 1990s (Barry, 1998 as cited in Robo, 2014.) during which the poor, those cut off from the world of work and education and those who lacked skills and capabilities to get and keep job were considered socially excluded (Robo, 2014).

Education, being accepted as a discourse of enhancing both development of individual and his/ her inclusion in social life (Pappas et al., 2018) is recognized as an egalitarian right to each individual by International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEFF], 2007) irrespective of their social background, gender, religion or age (Devkota & Bagale, 2015). With an adherence to these, education and social justice are given adequate space from national forum in Nepalese context too! Where the Right to Social Justice in article 42 of part 3 regards the constitution asserts special provision for each marginalized group for their protection, progress, empowerment and development, Right to Education guaranteed by the constitution in its Part 3, Article 31 states no discrimination to the individuals of Nepal for acquiring educational facilities rendered by the state in pretext of physical imparity, economic backwardness, gender, caste or any other attributes (Constituent Assembly Secretariat [CAS], 2015). It allows me to anticipate strong legislation made with a vision of creating equitable Nepalese society

by embracing inclusiveness in each sphere of social life. Amidst this, however, my experience instigates me to think question myself, “Are we really able to ensure social justice and equity, embracing the value of inclusion or it has been something really paradoxical?”

The study, hence, is aimed towards exploring the hidden realities behind the practice of being socially responsive, progressive school leader who advocates inclusion, social justice and equity. Living in the country where class, gender and ethnic inequalities often appear as obstacles in ensuring justice in distributing educational opportunities and rewards (Purkoti, 2009; as cited in Devkota & Bagale, 2015), one might have observed gap between theory of inclusion and its practice. Similarly, where much concern is paid towards addressing challenges to inclusive educational climate from the eyes of students and community, stories of school leaders might carry equal worth of being studied. Grounded on the questions of how the school leaders have been working to ensure inclusiveness and what challenges they have come across in course of practising them, I tend to dig deep into absurdity that prevails in the concept of ‘inclusion in education’ and its practice in school setting.

### **Setting the Scene: My Stand as a Teacher Leader**

“Ma’am, don’t you think you are making *too much* out of your consideration on us?” Jamyang’s remarks on my treatment as his social science facilitator dragged me down to the reality that I had never looked into. Having involved in the stream of teaching learning for more than a decade, I had grown pretty much confident about how I had been earning appreciation and affection from my pupils and the school management for my self- determination and the attitude of maintaining inclusive atmosphere in the classroom. Moreover, the announcement the school principal made in last annual assembly about his vision of making a *change* in the entire school setting was discovered to have got aligned with my perspective of enabling equitable learning atmosphere, which, my colleagues narrated on the very evening after the statement! May be, it added to my encouragement and I started finding a more amiable, a more comfortable way of disseminating so that each learner in the class would come out from the sphere of marginalization and thrive amongst others who had been exhibiting their confidence, enjoying all those privileges the school had thought they deserved being deserving ones!

Words started getting simplified, assignments were reduced to minimal projects and demonstrations and the placement was changed too! Thinking that I would not

leave any stone unturned so as to induce confidence among the striving buds, I slowed down the pace of the activities, expecting them to catch me up! However, after about six months of my surging confidence of being a democratic teacher- leader, Jamyang's reflection instigated me to re-think upon what I had been doing! Whilst I had been busy addressing what the students who needed special support, I had, in a sense been undermining how the confident ones had started growing apathetic. While I had been feeling gratified finding twenty out of thirty-one moving from last row to the second one voluntarily, probably, I had failed to read what the elevens had been expecting from me day after day. And as I started recounting upon how these six months had passed, Suman's fading charm started getting clearer; Mirmita's growing dependency grew vivid and I found Bibek standing by my side, with his eyes willing to say, "Ma'am, have you forgotten us?" I looked up at the sky, pondered for hours and with a heavy heart, asked to myself, "Was I really able to cultivate inclusiveness, and could I really harvest equity?"

### **Social Inclusion in Education: Concept and Practice in Nepalese Context**

Discussing particularly about the context of Nepal, the concept of social inclusion has been gaining immense popularity over years. Moving from the period where rigid hierarchy and structured ideology was formalized by the *Muluki Ain* (Civil Code), 1984 (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2010), we have come to the time when creating Nepal as an inclusive state and guaranteeing the right to equality has been a vision of the state (CAS, 2015). In fact, a number of advocacies that are being made for social inclusion and creating equitable society can be remarked as the observance of the nation to the central principle of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of *not leaving anyone behind* (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Working Group [GESIWG], 2017) while the National Planning Commission (NPC, 2017) has also emphasized the efforts of the state on achieving equality, and securing peace, justice, inclusion, and to induce higher aspirations of modern democratic nation-state.

Starting our journey with the establishment the first school in 1853 (MoE, 2003) which served academic interests of a limited group of elites, we have viewed a massive expansion in educational scenario since 1950s that has been contributed greatly by the national and international initiatives like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and Education for Rural Development Project (ERP) (Bhattarai, 2016). With the same effort of expansion, provision of allocating scholarships to disadvantaged students was made by School

Sector Reform Program (SSRP) 2009 which has been made stronger with strategic statement put forward by School Sector Development Program (SSDP) for reducing disparities in access and participation of students in pre-primary, secondary and career-focused literacy programs (MoE, 2016).

Regarding decentralization as the remedy to the age long problems seen in education emanating from centralization, efforts have been made for disseminating authority of public education to local communities since early 2000s (Bhatta, 2005) which can be acknowledged as strong effort made for encouraging democratic participation of people in education. Moreover, growing number of progressive schools and bolder advocacies about participatory approach popping out of the newspapers allow me to cultivate optimism about the vision of creating equitable Nepalese society. Despite this, narration of reinforcement of unequal opportunities and access in resource allocation, quality of educational infrastructures and facilities and less empowerment of teachers (Devkota & Bagale, 2015) seems to have remained a buzz in between the theory and practice of ensuring social justice by practising inclusiveness in this very discourse.

### **Research Methodology**

The study aimed at revealing the paradoxes experienced by school leaders in practising inclusiveness to ensure progressive teaching learning atmosphere among students.

Hence, narrative inquiry has been used as a way to understand and

study the school leaders' experiences (Clandinin, 2013, p. 15) while the study has been guided by interpretivism as research paradigm. In fact, human beings have always been the tellers of tales (Webster & Mertova, 2007) and I believe, their stories of experiencing paradox in being 'responsive leaders' are influenced and shaped by the physical, social and cultural environment around them (Haydon et al., 2017). Hence, to explore the challenges that the school leaders undergo, and that have been appearing as 'paradoxes' in practising inclusiveness, I embraced narrative inquiry as methodology that helped me underpin the research participants' personal experiences (Chase, 2008).

I conducted my study in two progressive institutional schools of Kathmandu

*People are always tellers of tales.  
They live surrounded by their stories and  
The stories of others; they see everything  
That happens to them through those stories  
And they try to live their lives as  
If they were recounting them  
(Sartre, 1964 as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007)*

valley where two school leaders were selected purposively. The main purpose of choosing Kathmandu valley as research site was accessibility whereas I selected the leaders from progressive schools purposively aligning with Merriam (1998) who considers purposive sampling as an appropriate strategy in qualitative research. Furthermore, since the very sampling technique allowed me in selecting the school leaders who had knowledge about inclusiveness in education, and also had the experiences of working to create inclusive school climate (Creswell & Clark, 2011) I find purposive sampling technique to be of greater pertinence.

I gathered information regarding the school leaders' experiences while creating inclusive school climate in the form of narratives for which I used interview as the research method. I contemplated interview as an appropriate method in my research since it encouraged me as researcher to talk with my research participants; while talking to research participants, as suggested by Kyave and Brinkman as cited in Saldana (2015) was really beneficial in understanding their worlds and their lives. Furthermore, since I had the realization that most of the narrative inquiries begin with storytelling (Clandinin & Huber, 2014), I encouraged my research participants to articulate the paradoxes they had experienced in the form of stories. While encouraging them, open ended questions were utilized to peep into the experiences of the school leaders (Kvale, 1996) while the questions were open and they were even different (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) as per the requirement. Amid this, I was aware of my duty as a researcher to make sure that my research participants' stories revolved around my research agenda. For this, I put probing questions so that my research participants would get motivated to narrate their stories (Clandinin, 2013), aligning to the central discourse of my study.

Throughout my research journey, I followed three metaphoric dimensions of narrative inquiry; place, temporality and sociality to gain rich information (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) and maintain credibility of my study. Simultaneous to listening to the participants' stories, I kept reflecting upon my own experiences. The reflection, I believe, was a reinforcement to co- construction of knowledge by me as a researcher and my research participants (Duncan, 2017). Furthermore, my recollection during the study, as articulated by Palaganas et al. (2017) even encouraged my engagement with my research participants.

Once the narratives were collected, I transcribed them and derived two themes based on my research question. Through this, I was able to reorganize the stories of school leaders' experiences gathered through the information processes into a

‘framework that makes sense’, and give meaning to what I derived by telling in a chronological and coherent manner (Creswell, 2014) and which was further elaborated in details with support of relevant literature.

### **Unfolding the Narratives and Meaning Making**

This section of the paper unveils the paradoxes experienced by the leaders of progressive school who have been working to ensure inclusiveness among students in their school setting. Findings are presented thematically followed by discussion, supported by relevant literature.

### **Being a Culturally Responsive Leader and Challenges Faced**

Supreme’s narration of how he has been working as a school principal to ensure inclusiveness among diverse students of his school was very encouraging for me. Reflecting upon his determination that none of his pupils remain less privileged from how he can facilitate them, he emphasized that the very first role of him as a school principal is to make sure that none of the pupils in his school remains secluded with regard to socio-cultural areas to which they belong. He stated:

*The very first and the most focused attempt that I make in my school is to make sure that the school shows no biasness to any of the pupils joining it; be it in regard to their individual traits and their capabilities or the socio-cultural background to which they belong. I have internalized, until and unless I get aware of the diversity that prevails in my school community and acknowledge it, I won’t be able to materialize the dream of seeing my students blooming with what they possess as individuals.* (Supreme, Personal Communication, 2019, June 5)

As Supreme articulated, being responsive towards cultural values of others is pivotal in ensuring inclusiveness in school setting. Role of an effective leader in understanding diversity and working accordingly is even emphasized by Johnson (2006), and Terewell and Lindsey (2009) who state that school leaders should understand the assumptions, beliefs and values about the people and the cultures that is different from their own so that they would be able to create effective school settings with diverse background of the students. It encourages me to internalize that the very crucial role of a leader in school setting is to align to social justice and work to ensure it.

Despite the practices of ensuring cultural integration among students, Supreme expressed that he had experienced unintentional exclusion. Talking particularly about the potluck the school had organized last year, he recounted:

*Last year, during potluck, a student came to school in school uniform when rest of the class was clad in their traditional attire. Moreover, the student had not brought anything as suggested for potluck. The entire day, he even didn't smile because he had been feeling embarrassed among his peers. While tending to be culturally responsive and ensure social inclusive, I failed to think of the student who was studying in full scholarship in the school because of being financially marginalized. (Supreme, Personal Communication, 2019, June 5)*

Being culturally responsive as an essence of leadership was even remarked by Bigya, the principal of thirty-two of another progressive school of Kathmandu. She added on what a school leader is to be doing under social justice approach so as to maintain what he/she calls inclusiveness at school. As she mentioned, the school leader, adhering to social justice approach should be action oriented and transformative, committed and persistent, inclusive and democratic, recreational and caring, reflective, oriented towards socially just pedagogy and should be able to develop tool box so that inclusion and social integration can be maintained in classroom and school setting (Furman, 2012). She further stated, *"I have always tried to understand my role to facilitate, discourage exclusion and motivate my students persistently as a school leader. It is what I believe makes my school an inclusive progressive one!"* (Bigya, Personal Communication, 2019, June 2).

Despite the effort she had been making to ensure that the cultural diversity of her context is well integrated, she said that often the ones who are considered to be the privileged groups remain overlooked amidst the effort of inclusion. Citing the provisions made in the Constitution of Nepal 2015 for special provisions made for ethnic and indigenous people (CAS, 2015), Bigya confronted that all who are labeled privileged by the state might not be privileged and vice versa. Reflecting upon her own experience, she articulated:

Starting from the admission procedure, ethnic and indigenous people are to be given special priority. But what I have found is, not all those belonging to the indigenous communities may not be under-privileged. While we are trying to bring them to the limelight, rest of the students often feel ignored. His sense of being neglected was explicitly observed among the students when the school prepared fusion of 'Maruni', 'Jhijhiya', 'Kauda' and 'Shyabro' to be displayed in the annual assembly but we didn't include 'jhyaure' which was a heritage of most of the students from Kathmandu and its suburbs. So, it is where I ask myself, "Did I really get able to be responsible towards cultural sensitivity of my students?" (Bigya, Personal



Communication, 2019, June 2)

When it came to reflecting upon who a good leader could be, both Supreme and Bigya narrated the ones capable of promoting and sustaining an environment stable to attract, maintain and support further development of culturally responsive teachers who are better prepared to work with children of diverse color (Khalifa et al., 2016). The same conviction of acting as culturally responsible encouraged them to look for paying attention to those called less privileged. However, narration of their stories allowed me to think that the discourse of social exclusion that the principals were trying to discourage is relational while sometimes exclusions can also be unconscious (Druza, 2016). Similarly, since inclusion of a group the school leaders had tried to assure was unintentionally leading towards exclusion of the other, it provided an insight that the way the discourses of inclusion and exclusion are understood and experienced vary (Beall & Paron, 2005) while exclusion that the students go through is often perceived as discriminatory behavior (Haan, 1999 as cited in Druza, 2016).

### **Segregation amidst Attempts of Inclusion**

Last night, as I completed my chores and sat for studying, the remarks Jamyang made instigated me to think again, “Was whatever I had been doing really inclusive?” As I had been growing insomniac, getting being able to come out of the enigma, I closed my eyes and reflected upon the annotations made by Supreme.

Supreme, in his rigor to bring the students of all learning abilities to the teaching learning platform stated that the attempts are made right from the process of preparing daily lesson plans and teaching materials. Even in the situation, however, he finds the students segregated since they are often treated ‘specially’. Talking about how the act of paying special attention to the students acts as an act of segregating, Supreme stated:

*Lesson plans are made and we try our best to execute our teaching learning methodology, aiming to facilitate all our pupils. For this, we even pay special attention to those who need special academic session. However, the attempts that we make results in contradiction. For the junior grades, those who are given special support feel they are extra pampered while the ones who are in senior grades feel why they are treated so? We even receive complaints from the parents that we are discouraging their kids by treating them differently! This is really challenging.* (Supreme, Personal Communication, 2019, June 5)

Supreme’s experience of facing dilemma while paying special attention to the students requiring additional academic support aligns to Michailakis and Reich (2009)

who state that procedure that differentiates the two groups is assumed to reflect the potential of the individual pupil of not being educated in regular class.

Bigya had a similar dilemma in practising inclusiveness among her pupils and as she expressed, the dilemma was because of narrow definition of inclusiveness. She had found her efforts of inclusiveness expected to be focused to special education and disability (Norwich, 2004) which had put her in a dilemma of how to get students requiring mild learning assistance integrated with rest of the pupils. Moreover, since the students requiring no assistance to the one who requires maximum support are kept in the class, dilemmas about identification (whether to identify and how, or not), curriculum (how much of a common curriculum is relevant to them) and placement (to what extent they learn in ordinary classes, or not) (Norwich, 2004) keep distressing her.

Discussing about the dilemma school often undergoes while making attempts to facilitate pupils with learning disabilities, Gray (2006) mentions that those having severe disabilities in learning are referred to as the pupils whose difficulties are not mild or moderate and which is often distinguished with reference to low incidence disabilities in learning. It articulates that those who are termed as requiring supportive assistance from the school are identified while those who have mild learning disabilities might remain unidentified and undermined that adds to the paradoxes in efforts the schools make in ensuring inclusiveness among students.

## **Conclusion**

Out of the engagement I made with the principals of the progressive schools who were my research participants, I came to realize that even in the atmosphere that paradoxes prevail even in the school environment we assume to be highly inclusive in nature. The first dilemma that the school leaders go through is regarding cultural values of all students in the context of country like ours. While the school leaders tend to include those labelled as marginalized and minorities with special attention, majority of cultural groups in classroom community might feel ignored. In the similar way, another paradox that prevailed was regarding academic discourse. When the students with learning disabilities are given focus, it might result in undermining rest of the learning. In the similar way, those who are given extra support might feel segregated in another way from the school.

The study, hence, implies that the discourse of inclusion is to be understood by the school leaders in a contextual way rather than getting it generalized. Often the school leaders tend to create extra amiable atmosphere for those they think require

additional support. However, while doing so, they might find ways to address all sorts of learners so that each of them remain motivated. Moreover, they can make an analysis of how their school hosts cultural groups and celebrate them; rather than celebrating the culture defined by the state.

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