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Exploring Classroom Teachers' Insights in Implementing Integrated Curriculum (IC): A Qualitative Case Study of Grade1-3 from Kalikot District, Nepal

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift from the traditional subject-cantered fragmented approach to Integrated Curriculum (IC) approach in school education worldwide. Framed in Beane's model of curriculum integration, this study aims to find the relevance, benefits, challenges and opportunities of implementing IC through the lived-experiences of primary grade teachers in Kalikot district. This study is grounded on a qualitative case study research method. Utilizing semi-structure questions as the research tool, we collected qualitative data from teachers (grade 1-3), who are directly involved in IC implementation. Following data collection, data analysis was then followed, adopting a six-step-thematic analysis method of Braun and Clark. The findings revealed that despite the overwhelming effectiveness, the teachers were found to be implementing IC without having sound theoretical and philosophical base. More specifically, teachers' compatible working hours, understanding of IC and school support were identified as the crucial predictors affecting teachers' use of IC. This study is significant as it highlights the need for well-planned training programs especially focusing on correlating of themes with soft skills, pedagogy of class delivery and assessment practices by concerned authority to strengthen the implementation of IC in school education.

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Introduction

Integrated Curriculum (IC) has been widely advocated and implemented around the world in recent years as an approach to school learning (Dare et al., 2021; Delahunty et al., 2021; Kunwar et al., 2025). IC approach moves forward breaking concept of the traditional subject centred approach to holistic student-centred learning (Park & Cho, 2022). Integrated Curriculum (IC) is defined as a model of curriculum that breaks away from traditional discipline based objective driven, teachers controlled method to interest based students' exploration (Kysilka, 1998). The combination of more than two areas of learning either in or out of various disciplines (Brewer, 2002) are basic tenets of the integrated curriculum. Similarly, Boluk (2022) views integrated curriculum (IC) as a strategy to unite core courses to support deep learning. Hence, integrated curriculum is organized in a way that it intersects subjects' boundaries, combining various aspects of curriculum in to meaningful ways.

Besides, IC associates multiple disciplines around the real themes which enhance critical thinking, creativity, and skills for solving complex local as well as global problems (Tuong et al., 2023). The practice of Integrated Curriculum fosters comprehensive and meaningful learning experiences to the learners connecting real life situation (Dare et al., 2021). This curriculum emphasizes the higher order thinking skills, cooperative learning on social issues and tolerance of other's values (Magister et al., 2020). It is to note that, IC model not only combines its contents with other disciplines, but also it focuses on integration of skills and procedures which are essential to cope the present societal problems. The real learning exists in real context, as the learners solve the problem themselves in their own social and cultural context with the scaffolding support from the peers without substantial intervention teachers. Therefore, IC approach is based on the assumption that learners get hand-on exposure to the problem and learn to solve the problem thinking critically using life skills with our explicit intervention. It motivates both learner and the instructors since principally, it is designed on the ground of democratic norms giving equal status to learner and the teachers.

Curriculum change is a common phenomenon worldwide in order to equip students with current knowledge skills and competences. However, looking back to the curriculum development pattern of Nepal, it had an out-dated subject centric curriculum, which could not hold the spirit of democratic changes in Nepal and the aspiration of future generation growing in the scientific advancement. (CDC, 2019b). Drawing insights from international trend and practices, Nepal incorporated with the principles of IC

only in 2019 with the approval of National Curriculum Framework [NCF]-2018. This document remains as the landmark initiative in education policy level since it introduces significant changes in school level curriculum shifting discipline-based curriculum to integrated-curriculum (NFC, 2018). As suggested by NFC, Nepal took an effort in implementing IC in grade 1 to 3 as a pilot project in 28 schools during the academic session of 2019 (Curriculum Development Centre, 2019). Although there are many ways and level of curriculum integration in practice, Nepal conceptualized its curriculum as interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach (CDC, 2019). Interdisciplinary design of curriculum aims to connect various subject areas within a cohesive framework, emphasizing inter connected educational experience. While multi-disciplinary approach adheres a common theme but maintains discipline-specific instruction and assessment (Wall & Leckie, 2017; Drake & Reid, 2020). The integrated Curriculum of 1-3 comprises of six major learning areas, including Language, Mathematics, Science, Social, Health, and Creative arts. The subjects like social studies, Science and environment, Health and Physical education and creative arts are grouped under a single subject called 'Our Surroundings' framed as interdisciplinary domain. Accordingly, subjects' areas like Our Surroundings, Mathematics, Nepali and English are grouped under multidisciplinary approach as they are distinct disciplines and are combined with shared themes.

Similarly, following Beane (1997) model of IC framework, soft skills are integrated with each of the themes of a particular subject. According to this theoretical framework IC is based on the assumption that curriculum design which is structured around meaningful themes and real life concerns of the students, moving away from discrete subject boundaries (Beane, 1997). The Curriculum of grade 1-3 devised for nurturing five major skills, namely thinking, interpersonal skill, intrapersonal skill, information communication skills, multiliteracy skills and citizenship skills (CDC, 2019b). There are all together 29 minor sub soft skills that are allocated into each theme of every class which are supposed to attain by students after the implementation.

The shift on approach of curriculum design has affected the evaluation system of students too (Paudel, 2024). Since the IC is completely based on formative assessment for assessing students learning outcomes (Atuhurra et al., 2023) it uses tools like observation, group discussion, classroom participation and pair observation to evaluate learners' competences. The formative assessment tools are designed under each theme relating to learning outcomes. The assessment section of curriculum suggests to award points from 1 to 4 based on their performance. If a student answers any learning outcomes correctly, she obtains 4; if answer is partially correct, she gets 3; if she answers with mistakes, she gets 2, and the one cannot answer gets 1. The pupil who cannot score good marks in each learning outcomes are provided feedback and remedial classes until expected achievement.

Therefore, this shift from subject centred curriculum to IC pose significant challenges to stake holders, especially the teachers who play crucial role in implementation of the curriculum.

In line with that, integrated learning is a child-centred approach (Drake & Reid, 2018) that makes children direct experience of several fields of study without making distinction of a discipline. It is flexible in strategy and learning outcomes are designed as per interest and need of children. Students are engaged in project work, group work, pair work and group discussion for first-hand experience.

The previous research on IC's implementation has focused on three primary topics. Some studies have explored detail analysis IC's concept, development and alignment of integrated curriculum (Dhungana, 2023; Kunwar et al., 2024; KC, 2025). Other studies have been focused on implementation, challenges and classroom practices of IC on general issues (Aryal, 2025; Shrestha, 2023; Paudel, 2024; Kunwar et al., 2025). Other studies carried out highlighting teachers' practices on assessment aligned with integrated curriculum (Paudel, 2024; Dhakal, 2016), and one of the researches focused on head teachers understanding on IC (Koirala & Neupane, 2023). However, no studies have carried out from the perspectives of classroom teachers' role in the implementation of the curriculum.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap with the key guiding research question: *how do grade teachers (1-3) from remote regions perceive and adopt the shift to IC and its implementation?* So, this study will document class teachers' experiences and challenges faced by them while instructing in classrooms, integrating soft skills in themes, designing of projects and assessing students' achievement. The idea mentioned above indicated that several factors are critical to successful curriculum implementation. This study attempts a comprehensive exploration of IC through Integrated Curriculum theory of Beane (1997) focusing on teachers' knowledge, pedagogical skills as well as other factors beyond teaching like resources, management.

Methods

This research explores teachers' perspective towards Integrated Curriculum to investigate challenges faced by teachers in implementation of newly revised curriculum in Kalikot, a remotely located district of Nepal. Guided by ontological understanding of multiple realities of a single phenomenon, this study applies a qualitative case study research method. A case study, according to Stake (1995) is an empirical inquiry focusing on specific-single bounded case which is chosen from multiple interacting cases with in real life circumstances. This definition of case study, therefore suggests that a case study is often conducted in natural settings with the aim of in-depth exploration of a single case out many cases without introducing a significant external intervention (Stake, 1995;

Yin, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The basic tenet of case study is to make interpretive understanding of the case rather than general understanding inductive analysis of the case. Following methodological underpinnings, this study aimed to uncover lived experiences of the grade teachers (1-3) while implementing the IC in their classroom practices. This section delineates the research design, participant demographics, data collecting technique, and data analysis methodologies.

We utilized a qualitative research method to explore influence of curriculum on teachers' activities in a classroom especially of basic level (1-3) in western Nepal. This qualitative case inquiry permits researchers to explore in depth on how teachers perceive and practice and how they navigate the pedagogical and contextual challenges of IC in their everyday teaching. It is to note that case study usually supports as the tools for researchers to study complex phenomenon within their context (Baxter & Jack, 2015) and explore the in-depth description of some social phenomenon. We explored the experience of class teachers while applying IC. Based on the approach, proposed by Yin (2014) as discussed by Hollweck (2015), we used case research to find out teachers lived-experiences related to IC implementation. Furthermore, this study explored real context of teaching, transforming and assessing school practices from the view of class teachers.

Three community schools from Khandachakra Municipality in north Karnali province were taken purposively (Baxter & Jack, 2015) for the study. All schools represent diverse cultural and geographical field in terms of students' flow, school's infrastructures and level of school education. The selected first school was an old and renowned with sufficient staffs and runs up to grade 12, the second school run up to grade 8 with more female staffs and, the third school runs up to grade 3 with poor economic status situated in Dalit community. From three typical school four teachers who were directly involved in implementing IC in grade 1 to 3 were selected as participants for the study. The participants represented different school contexts within the study area through purposive sampling method to guarantee representation and gain rich and diverse insights into the implementation of IC across different educational settings.

We gathered data from the field making clear about ethical issues regarding participants' share information with researchers. A rapport relationship was built with respondents before data being collected. The application state of prescribed curriculum 1-3 was discussed with the participants' minutely posing semi structured interview. The comprehensive interviews were performed with chosen educators to examine their experiences and perceptions concerning the execution of integrated curriculum. We adopted Wolcott's (1994) framework for data collection in qualitative case study method, where he provides three Es techniques such as Enquiring (interviewing), Experiencing (participants' observation), and Examining (studying documents). Following this framework, semi-structure interview with probing questions, was concentrated on

subjects like pedagogical practices, obtained professional training, obstacles occurred in curriculum implementation. Besides, each class of all participants were observed to see reality of their implication of soft skills relating a particular theme in the classroom. The focus of observation was to see students' participation and teachers' ability to create a context for engagement of students in learning. All discussions were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. We examined the archival records and documents maintained in the classrooms during the field as supplementary data collection tool.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the interview and the classroom observation was analysed systematically to generate reliable result. We analysed the data following the six step Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method to obtain the state of implication of IC and its practice in the classrooms. Following the steps, first, we familiarized ourselves with the data by transcribing the verbatim responses as into English. We repeatedly read and read the unstructured interview excerpts and observation notes to find initial patterns and relationship with in the data. It is to be noted that our focus was more on the on data which had been repeated many times by the participants. Second, we moved to identify the relationship of patterns by assigning initial codes across the entire data set. Third, we grouped the codes to derive potential themes. Fourth, we checked and reviewed the themes in relation to our central research question of teachers' perceptions on IC implementation. Fifth, we defined and named the themes, determining the scope and focus our study. Finally, we produced the report detecting educators' experiences, obstacles, and perceptions of curriculum efficacy. In short, we applied three Cs technique: Coding, Categorizing and Concept building. This thematic analysis method closely aligns with Miles & Huberman's (1994) three Ds thematic data abstraction framework which includes: Data reduction, Data display and Drawing conclusion while analysing the data. In fact, this thematic analysis offered a comprehensive and contextual insight into the implementation of curriculum.

Results and Discussion

The following four themes were systematically developed out of the rich qualitative data to observe teachers' perceptions and practices towards applying Integrated Curriculum: 1) *Limited conceptual understanding of IC*, 2) *Insufficient professional preparation for IC implementation*, 3) *Systematic assessment challenge*, and 4) *Challenge of traditional mind-set in IC implementation*.

Limited Conceptual Understanding of IC among Teachers

The curriculum development centre (CDC) emphasizes IC for grade 1-3 is grounded in both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to thematic

integration. Different disciplines are correlated with themes and are further assisted by soft skills to be obtained by the students (Curriculum Development Centre [CDC], 2018). The integrated learning approach, which a key factor of IC, is a learning design that presents learning materials in an integrated way connecting knowledge and experiences so that nothing remains separate (Beane, 1997; Mielikäinen, 2022; Berisha & Vula, 2021). However, teachers' practice in Khandachakra Municipality appeared to be inversely proportional, sharply contrasting with IC theoretical principles. The teachers were found to be treating it as traditional curriculum which focused on dissemination of subjective knowledge as a separate domain. Therefore, the concept of integrated curriculum is not clear to teachers. They treat it as subject-based curriculum while implementing into the classroom. They take theme as topic of a particular subject rather than correlating approaches. Stating this matter, teacher B mentioned, *"I know about the new curriculum, but I still have not gone seriously through the curriculum. I am using textbook as main source of teaching materials. I am not aware of soft skills mentioned in the curriculum."*

The class observation of respective teachers also showed teachers were not aware of the philosophical base of IC. They were found to be treated it as a traditional curriculum that focused on rote learning and memorization of the learning content. The classrooms teaching did not support for critical thinking, creativity and collaboration, rather it supported subjects in isolation.

Consequently, the research revealed that no teacher is ready to change regarding strategies to be applied into the classroom because it has dismantled teachers' identity as subject expert (Fu & Sibert, 2017) though the curriculum has explicitly suggested to use soft skills with specified themes. They were still based on subject-based pedagogical approach, preferring lecture method as main method of classroom instruction. Hence, these discussions appear to support the fact that teachers have been implementing without having the strong conceptual understanding and philosophical base of integrated curriculum, which ultimately results into a clear misalignment between policy, theory and practice of IC implementation in Nepalese context. Therefore, it can be concluded by saying that conceptual misunderstanding can be taken as the major obstacle in IC implementation.

Insufficient Professional Preparation for IC Implementation

Training is a continuous and vital part of teacher professional development. Launching a well-designed training on integrated curriculum benefits teachers taking into account practical situation and condition that influence possibility of IC implementation. Nevertheless, the implementation of new curriculum has been hampered largely due to insufficient and ineffective training opportunities to apply the theoretical principles into

classroom practice. This finding is theoretically aligned with Bean's (1997) IC framework which focuses on empowering teachers with conceptual clarity and about integrated curriculum and developing pedagogical competency for learner centred and democratic learning experience. Highlighting the importance of training on IC execution, participant A asserted as:

I have the curriculum and went through it, however, I have known it as an integration of multiple subjects. Neither I am able to design projects as suggested by the curriculum, nor do I make my class engaging as the curriculum suggests since we aren't duly trained for IC.

Integrated curriculum is an effective and relevant way to teach the 21st century competencies like collaborative skills, communicative skills, digital literacy, and leadership skills to solve complex global problems (Drake & Reid, 2018). In line with this theoretical assumption, the present curriculum has been revised based on National Curriculum Framework; the text books have been developed on the same ground highlighting 29 sub-soft skills referring to a particular theme. However, teachers teaching each subject could not get professional training on IC and its practical uses. It is significant to note that, our major training institutions, such as Faculty of Education and Human Resource Development, have not modified their pedagogical and practicum programs to address such issues. The local government, a major stake holder of school education, still cannot aware themselves to provide in-service teacher training to all, and the schools could not train their teachers either. During a meeting of education section at municipality one of the roster teacher asserted as, "I was a trainer of the teacher training. I also don't know how to relate sub skills with in the prescribe text book. I handled the workshop focusing on themes."

The data of Education branch of Khandachakra Municipality showed conducting 2 days training to train the basic level teachers every year. However, teachers were not satisfied with that type of training with local trainers. In one of the informal meet, the attendee school teacher said that the training was one of the formalities of the municipality.

The aforementioned scenario reveals that our professional teacher training system is fragile. The authentic institution neglect supporting the implication of the revised curriculum, and many teachers were curious to learn about Integrated Curriculum. There is a gap between teachers' expectation on training and the trainings delivery. Teachers are seeking trainings on how to handle a classroom in an integrated way, but our training institutions are focusing on the content like, what is integrated curriculum and how elements of curriculum are grouped in IC. More importantly, teachers are not well prepared mentally with this 1-3 integrated curriculum due to lack of training.

Systematic Assessment Challenge

Data obtained from interview with teachers indicated that evaluation part of IC has been much neglected because of lack on practical knowledge forming assessments. Since Integrated Curriculum heavily depends on formative evaluation, teachers often get confused with the term formative assessment practice. Teachers in Nepal are often blamed; they take training but hardly apply it in classroom teaching. However, when I (first researcher) supported some teachers informally on formative assessment system suggested by Integrated Curriculum 1-3, they assessed students learning outcomes by preparing portfolios of them and, further, providing support to weak students. In an informal discussion, teacher D posited:

Earlier I felt it difficult utilizing assessment scheme prepared in Curriculum. As I made them aware of, they are being assessed by that activity, my class become effective and I feel easy in the classroom because students actively engaged in the project work, group work, discussion and interaction.

In one of the classroom observations, the researchers found teacher C to be implementing assessment practice in her classroom using diary where she numbered as per students' participation. She believed it was difficult to maintain a portfolio in daily basis. She said, "It is time consuming to maintain portfolio in each classroom, so I keep diary for record and finally write on portfolio once a week."

It is to be noted, however, majority of teachers are still using paper pencil test to assess students' competences which is opposite to IC principle. These contexts indicate that some teachers are enthusiast applying formative tool to assess students' achievement whereas others are taking it as daunting task; they are seeking readymade format and do not want to transform. If teachers were well informed and made sure of their responsibility, implementation of IC would be easier.

Challenge of Traditional Pedagogical Mind-Set in IC Implementation

IC advocates not only subjects' integration, but also it demands dynamic strategies to be applied into the classroom. Thematic learning, pedagogically, based on an exploration of knowledge and values learning through themes so that students have complete understanding of subject matter in relevant context (Drake & Reid, 2018; Curriculum Development Centre [CDC], 2018). Teachers are supposed to review the syllabus so that learning takes place in interactive, inspiring, fun, challenging, efficient and motivating ways to ensure students' active participation and creating sufficient zone for creativity. Also, Teachers are assumed to have collaboration among the others to integrate teaching and obligate to multidisciplinary teaching (Haapaniemi et al., 2021) that further connects classroom teaching with other school activities (Shin, 2022).

The Integrated thematic learning principal strongly believes students find out, not

told, and the method in the project form whose learning is done inside or outside the classroom involving activities that integrate competences and subject. However, teachers are not following the methods and strategies suggested in the curriculum in Nepal. They think that they have less time for reviewing the curriculum each day and believes they have not sufficient materials to be introduced in to the classroom. Relating this matter, teacher B said, "I know some interactive methods for the classroom but I cannot use them because of time limitation; they are time taking and offer freedom to students which ultimately leads classroom noisy."

Similarly, in this regard, teacher C opined, "We have insufficient and less resourceful and untrained teachers to handle the classroom. So that we could not integrate various activities like songs, rhymes, story, games and creative tasks to teach in a thematic approach."

Class observations of teacher B, and C also showed that teachers were not using student- centered methods like discussion, demonstration, exhibition and group work for classroom instruction. Nor they created atmosphere for thriving critical thinking and problem solving skills of students. However, these pedagogical practices of in Nepalese context stand in sharp contrast with IC framework of Beane (1997), which emphasizes for the organization of curriculum around the meaningful themes to enhance democratic participation and active engagement of the students in learning process and for better learning outcomes.

"Lecture method is preferred by many teachers because it does not demand any preparation before the class; it is easy to use and forces their children to remain silent in to the classroom" said teacher D in an informal discussion. The given arguments and the observation indicate that our teachers are ready to adopt IC approach seriously, but they lack resources to design student friendly innovative teaching methods that supports learning actively. This finding aligns with Beane (1997) who advocates for equipping teachers with required skills to support for implementing a learner-cantered, inquiry-based and democratic curriculum. Nonetheless, due to the lack of supportive conditions necessary to implement IC, teachers are less confident do new endeavour. This situation ultimately reveals a notable gap between theoretical principle of IC and exact classroom implementation.

Conclusion

Although Curriculum Development Center (CDC) revised its traditional curriculum following core principles of IC, claiming that IC is superior and widely supported curriculum in the existing literature, there is a clear misalignment among its theoretical assumptions, formulated policies exact implementation in Nepalese education landscape. It is significant to note that most of the teachers teaching at grade 1-3 are implementing

IC in their pedagogical practices without significantly understanding the core values and principle of integrated curriculum. As a result the IC implementation in Khandachkra grade (1-3) schools is not satisfactory. It is due to the lack of focused-professional trainings on IC by trained professionals in concerned fields. There is a widening gap between teachers' actual abilities and belief of their knowledge and skills demands further investigation. Furthermore, the study confirmed that the teachers were not provided an opportunity to practice it as instructed by revised curriculum, though its potential benefit is realized in transformative classroom teaching and learning experience.

Regarding assessment, the observation revealed that none of the schools had maintained students' profile in daily basis and filled them with students' activities as per themes requirement. However, one secondary school (1-12) and one basic school (1-8) has recorded students' final achievement results as prescribed on IC. Teachers from those schools, properly understands how to calculate GPA in students achievement record too. This shows that teachers can use formative assessment if they are trained properly.

The current analysis of teachers' interview data confirmed the importance of professional development training as critical factors affecting curriculum implementation. Further, this study identified the ability of designing projects and skill of inserting soft skills in themes as two strong predictors of teachers' frequency of using IC in the classroom. Using Integrated Curriculum is not easy task since its work load stress teachers; it takes considerable time and requires collaboration from teachers in various disciplines.

Teachers' unwillingness to adopt new methods of instruction also acts as a factor affecting present curriculum. The present curriculum not only speaks about the integration of subjects matters, but also it suggests which methods are best to use for classroom instruction. The methods like group discussion, role play, pair work, and project work are advised to imply in the classroom teaching. However, it is not always justifiable to blame to teachers in all aspects because as the first researcher supported the teachers; they performed their tasks in no time. It is also interesting to note that the more support that teachers received from the colleagues, the faster integrated form of present curriculum they would use.

This study purposes teacher's professional development to conduct based on the findings. The authentic educational institutions should focused on active pedagogy such as storytelling, role playing and collaborative discourse which are common instructional pedagogy of IC. Moreover, special practical training on assessment program are crucial for student assessment. The government should allocate resources for teachers. Teachers should be trained on strategies like exploration, experiment, project based teaching to thematic approach. The skills of correlating soft skills with themes can be possible through Integrated of lesson and soft skills.

As we acknowledge, this is a small study which has highlighted the recent situation of Integrated Curriculum enactment in Nepal. Importantly, it flags that more research to be taken on challenges of implementing Integrated Curriculum to generate some guidance to teachers of grade 1 to 3.

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