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Secondary Level Classrooms

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Abstract

This study examines the perspectives of trained female educators on inclusive education within secondary classrooms, focusing on their approaches, challenges, and efforts to address diverse learning needs. A qualitative, phenomenological research design was employed, and data were collected through comprehensive, semi-structured interviews with an experienced female teacher from a community school in Budhanilkantha Municipality, Kathmandu, Nepal. Thematic analysis offered significant insights into how socio-economic diversity affects students' access to education and equity. The main findings reveal that teachers implement peer learning, project-based activities, counselling, and tailored support to bridge academic gaps and enhance inclusivity. Challenges encompass family-related issues, quota-based scholarships, and fostering positive social interactions. Educators advocate for collaborative learning environments to nurture mutual respect and empathy among students. The research concludes that inclusive education not only fosters equity but also enriches the learning experience by valuing diversity as a source of strength, ensuring every child feels acknowledged and empowered.

Keywords: Inclusiveness, Diversity, Equity, Socio-economic background, Peer learning

Introduction

Nepal is a country having multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious characteristics. According to the National Population and Housing Census 2021 (National Report), published by the National Statistics Office, there are 142 castes/ethnic groups, 124 languages and 10 different religions in Nepal (National Statistics Office, 2021). This structure of society is reflected in classrooms as well. So, we can see the presence of students from



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diverse backgrounds in classrooms. This is supported by one of the pioneer educationists, John Dewey. School is a miniature of society (Dewey, 2017).

The idea behind inclusive education is that all schools should accommodate all students' requirements, regardless of their level of competence or disability, so that students with or without disabilities can enjoy the same societal benefits of education (Donaldson et. al., 2023). This concept is based on the principle that schools should welcome every student who enters their premises and guarantee that the child's equality in the classroom regarding social acceptance and respect while accommodating the child's special needs (Amutuhaire, 2023). It is necessary to make teaching learning activities effective by addressing the meaningful presence of children of different languages, religions, genders and classes.

Inclusive Education

It has been said that school is the second home for every child. Community schools must become the first choice for children with poor economic and social backgrounds. Teachers and principals are the key stakeholders of mainstream schools in adopting inclusive approaches (DeMatthews, 2021). Schools must respect the differences of every child and provide education in a child-friendly environment according to the regular educational system. According to UNESCO, "Inclusive education means the school provides good education to all pupils irrespective of their varying abilities. All children will be treated with respect and ensured equal opportunities to learn together. Inclusive education is an ongoing process. Teachers must work actively and deliberately to reach their goals" (UNESCO, 2007). To include all children in education, classrooms, teaching learning methods, educational materials, playgrounds, drinking water, toilets, etc., should be suitable for them in school.

Inclusive education is designed to remove barriers to learning and provide opportunities for students to actualize their unique potential, regardless of their race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, exceptionality, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation (Kugalmass, 2014).

In this context, this study focuses on finding out the status of inclusiveness in the secondary level (grades 9-10) public schools in Budhanilakantha Municipality.

Inclusion does not and should not be understood or expressed solely in terms of the number of excluded or disadvantaged students who enrol and enter schools. Furthermore, it is essential to determine whether all students, regardless of their differences, who have been engaged in the learning process have achieved substantial outcomes and been prepared in such a way that they are no longer disadvantaged in terms of opportunities, both present and future (Bhatta, 2021). Similarly, the studies have indicated that there is a huge contradiction between the policy and practice of inclusive education in Nepal. To minimize the gaps and ease the implementation of inclusive education, there is a need for adequate study, prioritizing the research and development in the field (Chalise, 2021). Students who belong to different backgrounds from the others but are being taught in the same environment with the same methods and curricula might have faced many problems.



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Legal Provisions on Inclusive Education

The state shall not discriminate in the application of general laws, on the grounds of origin, religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, physical conditions, disability, health condition, matrimonital status, pregnancy, economic condition, language or geographical region, or ideology or any other such grounds (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015).

The Education Act (1971), regarding inclusiveness in school, has also focused on students without disabilities. (a) Education given to the blind, visually impaired, hearing impaired, autistic, intellectually disabled, physically disabled, and other differently abled children based on the regular educational system. (b) Inclusive education is the education given without any discrimination to children who are left behind due to social, financial or material reasons. (Education Act 2028, 9th amendment)

Inclusive education is the process of developing an educational system that ensures rights for all children to receive life-useful education in their community in a non-discriminatory environment, respecting the cultural, class, ethnic and geographical diversity (Inclusive Education Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2073).

These are some legal provisions made for the access of every child to mainstream education. As children and adolescents with some type of disability navigate the school system, the social and emotional deficits must also be recognized and addressed (Whalen & Henker, 1985). Each classroom accommodates students from the abovementioned different clusters with different economic, social, religious, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Because of this, the students' ability to learn also varies. Each student is unique and different from the other. Each student participates in the learning process at their own speed, interest and pace. Teachers also hold beliefs on the responsibility of the educational field to create inclusion, organized in three factors: general school policy, initiatives geared specifically towards ethnic minority students, and initiatives for students with a disability (Vantieghem et. al., 2023)

Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to explore the perceptions and attitudes of trained female teachers towards inclusive education in secondary-level classrooms.

Research Questions

To fulfil the essence of the objectives, the following research questions were asked of the targeted population of the study.

- a. How do trained female teachers perceive inclusive education, and what are their attitudes towards its implementation in secondary-level classrooms?
- b. What strategies and teaching practices do trained female teachers use to meet the diverse learning needs of students in inclusive secondary-level classrooms?

The education policies and their implementation failed to hold the transformative promise of Leave No One Behind (LNOB) in addressing structural barriers and promoting the indigenous knowledge and skills of Dalits. (Gandharba & Pant, 2023). I studied various other research works related to my research topic. In those research works, I found that there are not many studies that are similar to the objective and research questions of my research work. It can be understood from the presented literature that although there are various studies related to



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e has not been much research on the experience

inclusive education, there has not been much research on the experience of trained female teachers towards the role of inclusive education in secondary level classrooms, which is the research gap in this study. My research study is about the experience of trained female teachers towards inclusiveness at secondary level classrooms. As I could not find many research works on this area, my research will answer the research questions related to this issue.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The major objective of the research study was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of trained female teachers towards inclusive education in secondary-level classrooms. A qualitative approach has been chosen to investigate female teachers' experiences towards inclusiveness at secondary level classrooms. A phenomenological approach has been adopted to make sense of how female teachers experience, describe, feel about, remember, and judge the inclusive classrooms. This study is based on a qualitative research design. The study has been conducted with in-depth interview of experienced female teacher who has been teaching in heterogeneous classrooms of secondary-level community schools in Budhanilkantha municipality for a long time. An in-depth interview was conducted with the respondent teacher using a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions carried out in Nepali. (Cleland & Ireland, 2002). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to facilitate open-ended talks with participants, allowing them to articulate their viewpoints and experiences in their own words (Cleland & Ireland, 2002).

During the interview, the respondent teacher was interviewed at the researcher's office on 13th, 15th, 18th and 20th Kartik, 2081. The interview was done in person to develop trust and allow for more in-depth talks. Although not all the questionnaires were fully prepared for this indepth interview, the interview was started with sufficient mental preparation. The conversation was informal. The responses of the respondent teacher have been considered as the main source of the study. The lived experiences of the respondent teacher are the main source of this study. The current study investigated the experience of female teachers on inclusiveness in secondary-level classrooms. The use of teachers as the main data source. Teachers' narratives were utilized to analyze, understand, and describe (Byrne, 2001).

Creswell (2015) noted that qualitative research provides researchers with more flexibility in exploring topics as they arise, and can allow participants to form their research direction and share their opinions freely. The qualitative nature of the study provided an opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education. More specifically, this study employed a phenomenological method to explore and describe the lived experiences of teachers, which can lead to the interpretation of the facts.

Teachers' qualitative narratives were collected through semi-structured interviews, which addressed the themes identified by the study's research questions. Instrumentation: Semi-structured interviews were the primary tool for data collection.



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Sample and Population

The sample of the study was selected from a population of community school teacher teaching in Budhanilkantha Municipality, Kathmandu, Nepal. The experienced teacher, who was accessible to the researcher and had interacted with and had been teaching at community school. The participant was selected according to the study's primary goal (Morse, 1991) and to obtain rich information from those participants who can provide it and are suitable for detailed research (Patton, 2002).

Thus, the selected participant was a community school teacher who has been teaching students from diverse backgrounds. She has been closely familiar with the researcher for a long time. The teacher who consented to participate and who could provide detailed and in-depth data was interviewed. Some facts were drawn from close observation done informally. The data were collected from the teacher who is in service because teachers working in schools can provide realistic, precise data on their classroom's scenario and the real situation of the students and their learning styles and abilities, especially regarding inclusiveness in their classrooms. Since she is experienced regarding inclusiveness in school-level education, the findings of the research work can be generalized.

Methods of data collection

An in-depth interview was conducted with the respondent teacher using semi-structured interviews. During the interview, the teacher was interviewed at the researcher's office on 13th, 15th, 18th and 20th Kartik, 2081. During the interview, we chatted informally while having tea. As my respondent/interviewee is a teacher at a community school, our professional beliefs and values were very similar, so neither of us felt any awkwardness or discomfort during our conversation. Although all the questionnaires were fully prepared for this in-depth interview, the interview started with sufficient mental preparation. The respondent teacher's response is considered the primary source of the study. The lived experience of the respondent teacher is the main source of this study. An interview with the respondent participant was conducted in person to develop trust and allow for more in-depth talks. The interview was audio-recorded to correctly capture the participant's responses after her permission. The interview lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. As all the questions in the interview were not prepared and structurally designed, the interview proceeded and concluded informally. After the interview was completed, the interview was transcribed. After transcribing the interviews, it was grouped from different angles, let's say they were coded, and again divided into different categories.

Then, themes were created based on the categories found, and sub-themes were also created based on the themes and written in paragraphs to further narrow down the study. And, based on those themes and sub-themes, the conclusion of this study was advanced. To enhance the credibility of findings, preliminary findings were shared with the participant to ensure accuracy and resonance with her experiences. This process allows researchers to confirm their interpretations, identify potential misunderstandings, and gain deeper insights into the participants' perspectives. There was further mutual understanding and more clarity between the participant and the researcher regarding the research topic.



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Furthermore, the researcher has used secondary data with a thorough search of online databases such as EBSCO, Google Scholar, Sage and JSTOR, hoping to find relevant studies, reports, articles, and legal documents about inclusive education. The respondent participant in the interview was asked various questions based on the objectives of the study. Such as: the number of students in the classroom they teach, the various background of the students, the participation of those students in the learning process or their interest and its role in order to support inclusive education in the curriculum, the behavior or teaching styles of the teachers towards students who do not have disabilities but are from different backgrounds and the behavior of fellow students to others, monitoring and support by the school administration along with the other teachers and students, students' participation in different types of peer learning and group work activities while teaching students from different backgrounds, the way the female teacher addresses the inclusiveness in the classrooms, the context of the teaching methods and procedures the teacher use while teaching and the impact of the classroom setting and classroom management on the learning of the children from different backgrounds and the analysis of results according to separate clusters of children from different backgrounds.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the transcribed interview material systematically (Cleland & Ireland, 2002). The entire process included the following steps: familiarization with the collected data, initial coding from the data, identifying relevant features that are interesting or meaningful, searching for themes, organize the codes into potential categories that capture important patterns, creating themes, reviewing themes, refine the themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data and are distinct from each other, defining and naming themes, writing up to present the analysis, integrating quotes and examples from the data to illustrate each theme.

Results and Discussion

Bridging Diversity: The Impact of Socio-Economic Backgrounds on Educational Equity.

Navigating Inequality: Focusing on Well-Being in Diverse Classrooms

Female educators recognize that socio-economic diversity significantly affects students' access to educational resources and additional opportunities. The responding teacher remarked, "Children who interact more freely with peers, regardless of caste, religion, or community, tend to participate more in activities. Ethnicity is evident in sports; students from the Tamang, Gurung, and Magar communities excel in athletics." She highlights that students from financially stable households are often more involved in activities and frequently excel in project work, while those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds encounter various obstacles. The school offers scholarships, career counselling, and health support to help alleviate these disparities, yet she underscores that issues such as family breakdown and financial difficulties frequently hinder students' learning, making their emotional well-being a primary concern over academic success. She observes, "A student participating in project work tends to excel in all activities. Interestingly, a child who struggles academically and doesn't complete homework often performs exceptionally well in project work."



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Fostering Equity: Inclusion as a Fundamental Aspect of Embracing Classroom Diversity

Female teachers advocate for addressing socio-economic disparities as vital for achieving genuine equity in secondary classrooms. The responding educator pointed out the necessity of providing equitable learning opportunities for students from varied backgrounds, including Dalits, those facing economic hardships, and those with language barriers. She stresses the importance of peer learning, project-based work, and customized counselling to assist students experiencing socio-economic challenges. She firmly states, "Diversity is integral to our identity... It would be beneficial to educate all children together. "The respondent perceives inclusion as a means to equity, ensuring that no student feels marginalized due to caste, religion, or economic status, while simultaneously nurturing pride in their diversity.

Empowering All: Customized Support for Inclusive and Equitable Learning

The female educator underscores the importance of specialized support systems that help students from disadvantaged backgrounds keep pace with their peers. She highlights the need to address diversity by incorporating peer learning, group projects, and hands-on activities. She states, "We offer counselling, yoga, and meditation for students who face learning challenges and make sure that physically weaker students are seated in the front to meet their needs." Furthermore, the school partners with external organizations to assist economically vulnerable students. She emphasizes the critical role teachers play in promoting inclusiveness, asserting, "We strive to create a comparable learning environment without differentiating based on caste, religion, gender, or region."

Advancing Equity: Inclusive Strategies to Close Economic and Social Disparities

This female educator champions inclusive practices aimed at addressing economic inequalities, such as scholarships, free educational materials, and mentorship programs. She noted, "We provide Rs. 400 as a government scholarship... It's easier to recognize girls, but identifying Dalit students requires us to examine attendance records, as they often do not disclose their community identity." Additionally, teachers advocate for peer learning and collaborative activities to narrow academic performance gaps, emphasizing equity rather than equality. Schools also provide counselling, career guidance, and health support for economically disadvantaged students, ensuring a nurturing and safe atmosphere for learning.

Building Bridges: Fostering Empathy for Inclusive and Equitable Education

The female educator concentrates on nurturing empathy and comprehension among students from various socio-economic backgrounds, which can foster a more inclusive and equitable learning atmosphere. Female educators are essential in cultivating empathy and understanding among pupils from diverse socio-economic groups, thereby encouraging inclusivity and fairness in education. The interviewee noted that female students frequently confide in them about personal challenges, like financial issues or family concerns, which aids in establishing a stronger emotional bond. The educators mentioned, "We regard our female students as if they were our daughters. We see reflections of our daughters in them. By addressing these challenges and fostering a supportive atmosphere, female teachers ensure that students feel appreciated and understood, enhancing their engagement and learning regardless of their socio-economic background, caste, or gender."



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Balancing fairness and inclusion: Tackling the difficulties associated with quota-based scholarships and encouraging positive social interactions for inclusive education.

The female educator believes that inclusive education should foster awareness and empathy to minimize biases and encourage positive relationships among peers. The teacher remarked, "Students from different backgrounds can flourish together in a shared learning environment, as it cultivates mutual respect and understanding." Although diversity may bring initial difficulties, particularly for students with varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it ultimately becomes a source of pride and enhances the learning experience. She asserts that emotional support, especially from female educators, is crucial in meeting the diverse needs of students and promoting inclusion.

Welcoming diversity: Promoting awareness and empathy in support of inclusive education. Inclusivity should be paired with comprehensive support systems, including academic mentorship, psychological counselling, and financial aid to assist marginalized students. Achieving inclusiveness in education necessitates thorough support systems to cater to the diverse needs of learners. The interviewed female educator emphasizes, "We cater to the diversity of children by seating those with hearing or vision impairments at the front and offering counselling for students dealing with family or psychological challenges." Moreover, peer learning, project-based initiatives, and career guidance are employed to engage students from different backgrounds. The school partners with organizations for financial assistance and healthcare, stressing that "diversity is part of our identity." This inclusive strategy ensures that all students, regardless of their socio-economic, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds, can participate in and excel in their education.

Uniting through education: overcoming barriers in varied classrooms

The female teacher interviewed emphasizes that inclusive education should create collaborative learning settings where students from different backgrounds can participate in significant social exchanges, dismantling social barriers and promoting mutual respect and understanding. She points out the value of peer learning, stating, "We focus on group work to enhance creative abilities. An academically weaker friend receives assistance from a peer who excels, fostering teamwork and breaking down social barriers." She also stresses the need to embrace diversity in the classroom, adding, "Diversity is part of our identity. We should take pride in it, as it seems to positively influence learning rather than detract from it."

Fostering inclusive classrooms: reaching a balance between equity, diversity, and social interaction in education

Achieving a balance between equity and inclusion in education involves tackling challenges such as quota-based scholarships while nurturing an inclusive learning atmosphere that encourages positive social interactions and teamwork among students from diverse backgrounds. The respondent female teacher emphasizes the necessity of cultivating an inclusive educational setting where students from various backgrounds, irrespective of their caste, religion, or economic status, can prosper. Although quota-based scholarships are intended to support disadvantaged students, these initiatives must ensure that students' identities are not merely defined by their economic situation or background. Promoting peer



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learning, encouraging group activities, and focusing on fairness and equity in classroom endeavours helps to tear down social barriers. By fostering interaction and collaboration, educators can assist students from different backgrounds in feeling respected, valued, and

included, ultimately leading to a more inclusive educational experience.

Ongoing training and resources to ensure equitable participation

Inclusion goes beyond mere numbers; it entails ongoing training and resources to guarantee equitable participation. During the discussion, the teacher shared varying views on how the quota system impacts inclusivity among permanent teachers in community schools. She noted, "The quota system has opened doors for underrepresented groups, yet its application needs to be just and transparent." She further raised an important issue, stating, "While the policy is designed to promote inclusiveness, it can occasionally result in tokenism, selecting individuals without adequate qualifications." She reiterated the positive aspect, saying, "For the first time, women and marginalized communities feel represented and valued within the teaching profession." However, challenges still exist. These observations highlight both the achievements and shortcomings of the quota system, revealing a complex understanding of its role in enhancing inclusivity and equity in Nepal's community schools.

Conclusion

The female educator trained in inclusive education considers it vital for promoting equity and empathy within secondary school classrooms. She highlights that socio-economic diversity greatly influences the accessibility of educational opportunities for students. (De Klerk & De Klerk, 2018) The teaching staff acknowledges the necessity of providing fair support to marginalized groups, including Dalits, economically challenged students, and those with language barriers. They employ strategies such as peer learning, collaborative projects, group initiatives, personalized guidance, and partnerships with external organizations to address academic disparities (Suldo et al., 2009). The female teacher focuses on the well-being of her students by providing counselling, health assistance, and addressing psychological and family issues. She promotes the establishment of collaborative learning settings where students from varied backgrounds can engage in meaningful interactions, thereby fostering mutual respect and dismantling social divisions. She also asserts that diversity should be embraced as a source of pride, enhancing the educational experience. A caring approach, especially toward female students, strengthens emotional bonds, ensuring that every student feels valued, included, and empowered to achieve success.



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