

Strategies for Including the Excluded in Education: A Case of Children with Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This article has been prepared to disclose a number of strategies that need to be implemented to ensure the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in education. This research is guided by interpretive paradigm accompanied by institutional ethnography. Eight special education teachers, four resource classroom teachers, and five experts working in the field of inclusive education were chosen as the sample of the study by employing purposive sampling technique. In-depth interview and desk review were used as the main techniques to collect information and then the information were transcribed, edited, classified, and thematized by considering the objective of this study. External audit, peer review and thick description have been used as major techniques to maximize the credibility and authenticity of this article. Results of this study reveal that almost all students with intellectual disabilities were receiving educational services in segregated settings though there are policy provisions of providing inclusive education. Therefore, different strategies such as providing multi-tiered supports, developing sense of belongingness, educating in the mainstream classroom, mobilizing peers, formulating alternative learning standards, creating cooperative learning environment, etc. should be employed to optimize the inclusion of these children in education

Keywords: Strategies, students with intellectual disabilities, inclusion, exclusion, education

Introduction

United Nations Convention on the Right of Person with Disabilities (CRPD) affirms that the government shall ensure an inclusive educational setting at all levels to provide quality services to all children including those with intellectual disabilities (United Nations, 2006; cited in Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2015). In an inclusive setting, the educational system is adapted to accommodate the needs of children, rather than expecting them to fit into the system (Zelta, 2016). Students might encounter feelings of exclusion within their classrooms if they lack adequate access to the curriculum. As a solution, adaptation has been identified as a crucial approach to guaranteeing access to curriculum and instruction in regular classroom settings (Kearney, 2009). As a member country of United Nations, Nepal has made a constitutional provision of providing free education up to the university level for all children with disabilities (CWDs) (Nepal Law Commission, 2015). Consequently, 16,922 children with poor cognitive abilities are getting school education (Department of Education, 2016) through 14 special schools and 122 resource classes throughout the country (Ministry of Education, 2017) based on right-based model. National Education Policy-2076 has made a provision of receiving education by children with and without disabilities together under an inclusive setting (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2019). Even though there are a number of laws and legislations for providing education to all children together in the mainstream classroom, they cannot get sufficient benefits there due to a poor support system and are compelled to be segregated for the reason of education.

Children with intellectual disabilities have been understood from a deficit-based perspective (Thompson et al., 2017) in a significant number of countries including Nepal; and this perspective has led to limited expectations and opportunities for them to access general education curriculum primarily designed for children without disabilities. With the change of time, the diagnosis of intellectual disabilities has been shifted from a measurement of cognitive abilities (mainly IQ tests) to a mix of cognitive abilities and adaptive behaviors (Richards et al., 2015; Shaw & Jankowska, 2018). Nowadays, meeting a minimum of three criteria is necessary for an individual to be classified as having intellectual disabilities according to DSM-5. These criteria include deficits in intellectual functioning, deficits in adaptive behaviors, and the onset of these deficits during the developmental period (Brue & Wilmshurst, 2016; Shaw & Jankowska, 2018). Children with intellectual disabilities experience limitations in cognitive abilities, leading to challenges in memory, learning, motivation, generalization, self-care skills, social relationships, communication, and meta-cognitive skills (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006; Heward, 2013; Brue & Wilmshurst, 2016). As a result, they are unable to fully access the general education curriculum without the appropriate accommodations and modifications. To bridge the gap, students

with intellectual disability need supports that modify the curriculum, accommodate the teaching strategies and options for demonstrating learning and achievement.

The group of children with intellectual disabilities is highly diverse, encompassing a wide range of severity levels, from mild to profound (Westwood, 2007; Heward, 2013; Kirk et al., 2015; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2018). Consequently, even when these children have similar types of disabilities, they cannot fully benefit from general education services without significant accommodations and modifications (Downing, 2010; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2018). Due to the varying degrees of severity among students with intellectual disabilities, ranging from mild to moderate, severe, and profound levels, they require different levels of support tailored to their individual needs. These levels of support include intermittent (provided as needed), limited (continuously provided for a short period), extensive (continuously provided on a regular basis), and pervasive (constantly provided with high-intensity involvement, often requiring more staff members). These specialized supports aim at maximizing each student's academic and functional growth to the fullest extent possible (Heward, 2013; Kirk et al., 2015). Frequently, these students fail to observe pertinent aspects of the subject matter being taught and do not exhibit the acquired skills without prompting. These students also have challenges especially in comprehension, expressing what they have learned, and describing individual needs (Vaughn et al., 2018). Although these students can receive information through vision, hearing, motor activity, touch, taste and smell, they have problems in remembering information, classifying them, relating one information to another, and giving arguments logically (Kirk et al., 2015). Such problems cause poor expressive skills, which adversely influence academic achievements.

It is proved that inclusive education is most essential to provide quality education to all children including those with intellectual disabilities in general classroom setting. Inclusive education represents a manifestation of social justice within the realm of education, aiming to establish just and equitable educational principles that counteract discrimination and bias arising from individual differences. Its core purpose is to ensure fair treatment for all students, regardless of their unique characteristics (Kearney, 2009; Zelta, 2016). But a segregated educational practice restricts the rights of special children and limits the opportunities for self-fulfillment (CERID, 2004). Adapting the official curricula is crucial to ensuring access for all children, including those with intellectual disabilities, who may face exclusion in the classroom (Kearney, 2009). School professionals play a vital role in implementing adaptation practices to eliminate barriers to inclusive education (Sands et al., 2000). The Nepal Government has recognized the importance of inclusive education and has included provisions in national level policy documents (Curriculum Development Center, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2009). However, despite these efforts, the current approach still requires all

children, regardless of their learning needs or disabilities, to follow the same lessons (Curriculum Development Center, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2011). Consequently, students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools continue to face challenges in accessing the general education curriculum, resulting in their exclusion both from and within their schools (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

In Nepal, all schools must follow the curricula developed by CDC while conducting different instructional activities. The curricula made at central level cannot be relevant for all without its accommodations and modifications on a required basis. School teachers should accommodate prepared curricula by considering the learning needs, interest, and academic background of the learners to ensure their learning to a fuller extent. But in Nepalese context, students with intellectual disabilities have not been receiving inclusive education services as per their special learning needs despite attending general educational programs with their peers without disabilities for several years. In this regard, this study aims at investigating some practical interventions that need to be practiced to optimize the access of these students to general education curriculum implemented at basic level in Nepalese public schools.

Methods

This study was based on interpretive-constructivist research paradigm followed by institutional ethnography design (Wright, 2017; Smith, 2005). All special schools from Bagmati province, all general schools having the resource classrooms (where students with intellectual disabilities study together with their typically developing peers) from province 1 and Bagmati province, special education teachers, resource classroom teachers, and experts working in the field of special and inclusive education were taken as the population of this study. Furthermore, four special schools where children with intellectual disabilities were receiving educational services, eight special education teachers, two resource classes (one from Koshi Province and one from Bagmati Province), four resource teachers (two from each resource classroom), and five experts working in the field of special/special needs/inclusive education were chosen as research sample by using purposive sampling method.

In-depth interview and document analysis were used as the main techniques for gathering information in this study. Each informant was interviewed from thirty-five to forty-five minutes to collect the required information which was then transcribed, edited, classified, and thermalized by considering the objective of the study. Several verbatims have been used under each theme generated to provide clear picture of the phenomenon investigated. External audit, peer review and thick description have been used as major techniques to maximize the credibility and authenticity of study

results and conclusions. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the respondents and the institutions involved in this study.

Results

Nepal Government has been providing equal learning opportunities to all students, including those with intellectual disabilities by endorsing various educational policies and programs. There are provisions for scholarship to the students with disabilities. Moreover, special schools, integrated schools, and resource classrooms have been established. Provision of special teachers, resource classroom teachers, residential facilities for those who have severe and profound types of disabilities, etc. are some examples of such attempts. Children with intellectual disabilities also have a wide range of learning needs though they possess similar type of disability. Therefore, these children need a continuum of supports to ensure their inclusion in education.

Research results show that even though Government of Nepal has been implementing different policies and programs to provide educational opportunities to all children including those with intellectual disabilities, these educational services are not equitable to fulfill their special learning needs. Almost all the students with intellectual disabilities were spending most of their school time in special schools and resource classrooms for years with limited supports by following separate curriculum. In this regard, research results reveal that the following strategies are fruitful to strengthen the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in education.

Provide multi-tiered supports: Most of the children with intellectual disabilities have potentialities to learn knowledge, values, and skills intended by general education curricula especially implemented in lower classes. Since the learning abilities, learning styles, learning pace, and readiness level of these children are significantly different than their typically developing peers, they require different types of supports to ensure their access to the curricula. These children can have mild to profound level of severity of disability. Most of them can get benefit from the services provided in general education classrooms alongside with their typically developing peers. Some of them need small group instruction, and a few of them can benefit only from individualized instruction. *Different types of supports are required for learners with intellectual disabilities to optimize their learning*, a special teacher answered. *Some students are attending both general and resource classes...They spend most of their school hours in general classroom with their peers without disabilities and they also attend in resource class to receive additional supports*, a resource teacher replied. Furthermore, an expert shared his opinion as follows: Though students with intellectual disabilities

possess similar type of disability, the severity of their disability ranges from mild to profound level. The educational supports seem to be fruitful for children with mild level of intellectual disabilities, but may not be useful to the children with moderate level of intellectual disabilities...Therefore, multi-tiered supports should be provided to them to ensure their access to prescribed curriculum [Expert-2].

The verbatim shared by different informants indicate that multi-tiered support should be made available in all classrooms to maximize the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in learning process. At the first level, all supplementary supports (differentiated instruction, extended time, accessible learning materials for examples) are provided in general classrooms to address their learning needs; and those who cannot get benefit from general educational setting; small-group instruction is provided to them in either special classes or resource classes for additional learning support. And, finally, individualized supports are provided to those learners who could not get benefits from small group instruction.

Develop a sense of belongingness: Students should have ownership of the program in which they participate. The probability of them experiencing a sense of belonging within the classroom is higher when they can predict what is going to happen during school hours. In other words, all students including those with intellectual disabilities can feel sense of belongingness when they are informed about the routine of classroom, instructional materials that they are going to consult, time for communication, etc. *Collaborative work with students and involving them in decision making process can be helpful to develop sense of belongingness within the learners, which create motivation towards learning. Consequently, they show their active participation in teaching learning process,* Expert-1 informed. *Students with disabilities must be taken as an integral part of teaching-learning process and supports must be provided based on their individual needs to ensure their inclusion,* Special Teacher-2 from School-B answered. Furthermore, another expert shared: Most of the students with disabilities are taught in segregated educational setting...and those who have access to general education classroom cannot become an integral part of classroom. Therefore, they should be regularly informed about what is going to happen in the classroom...then they can contribute to make the classroom more productive... [Expert- 4].

Students with intellectual disabilities are alienated within the school in spite of sharing the same classroom with their typically developing peers. Most of the activities carried out inside the classroom are conducted primarily to fulfill the common needs of the

students without disabilities. Therefore, these aspects must be improved to increase the sense of belongingness of the learners with intellectual disabilities.

Institutionalize partial participation: Some students with intellectual disabilities need small group and individualized instruction. It means, all of their special learning needs cannot be fulfilled under general educational setting. Nevertheless, they have rights to receive education along with their typically developing peers in an inclusive education setting by following general education curricula. Such opportunity not only benefitted both the parties but also prepared them to live together in their adult life in a harmonious way. The notion of partial participation presupposes that every individual possesses the entitlement to engage in all activities to the maximum extent possible. This strategy should be used on a routine basis to foster active engagement of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classroom. In this regard, some informants replied as bellows: Though the students with severe and profound disabilities are more benefitted from individualized instruction, they have equal rights to be a part of general education classroom...this process not only make classroom inclusive but also help us create an inclusive society in the future..., [shared by Expert-3]. Inclusive education can be beneficial to both children with and without disabilities as compared to special and integrated education. Students with intellectual disabilities can get continuous supports from their same age peers without disabilities if they can get chance to spend some school hours alongside them...Therefore, an opportunity to be a part of general classroom should be provided to them by allocating certain portion of time of each school day..., [Expert-4]. Even though there is a policy provision of integrating children with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classroom after spending a couple of months in resource classroom, they have been staying three to four years in self-contained resource classroom without being part of mainstream classroom. Consequently, they have not received support from their normal peers that they are supposed to be..., therefore, their participation in general classroom must be ensured on a routine basis: [Resource Teacher-1 from School-B]. Segregated education does not prepare children with intellectual disabilities to be an integral part of a broader society...In segregated setting, neither the students with disabilities nor the students without disabilities could understand each other that ultimately divide a society into two strata..., therefore, students with intellectual disabilities should be taught in an inclusive education setting to a greater extent possible..., [Resource Teacher-2 from School-B].

The above statements indicate that the students with intellectual disabilities should be taught in the mainstream classroom to a maximum extent possible for their inclusion.

But they have got little chance to take part in the mainstream classrooms primarily in Nepalese schools due to poor expectation from them, frail physical infrastructure of school, limited training for teachers, low awareness about inclusive education, limited instructional materials, and the like. These aspects therefore should be improved to optimize the access of these children to general education curriculum under inclusive learning environment.

Follow a routine to guide the students: Cognitive ability of learners with intellectual disabilities is significantly poorer than their peers without disabilities. These children therefore need clear instruction even to execute their daily activities. They may need direct and explicit instruction even in day-to-day routines such as bathing, brushing teeth, getting on the bus, buying something from grocery stores, using telephone, etc. *Clear instruction should be provided to each learner based on her/his peculiar learning needs to offer intended behaviors*, Special Teacher-2 from Special School-B indicated. *Clear instruction should be provided to the children with intellectual disabilities before involving them in specific task*, Teacher-1 from Special School-D opined. *...frequent instruction is required to these children because they cannot follow the instruction always that they received once due to poor cognitive ability*, an Expert disclosed. Thus, a significant number of informants indicated that clear suggestions and feedback should be given to the students with intellectual disabilities on a continuous basis to help them show desirable behaviors effectively. School teachers can make a routine and follow it to guide them.

Develop a peer support mechanism: Peers have a phenomenal influence on each child's learning including those with intellectual disabilities. Typically developing peers can play a supportive and conducive role to help their same age peers with disabilities learn curricular contents. But peer is the most underrated and underused human resource in Nepal though it is available in each mainstream classroom. Nondisabled peers exhibit creative problem-solving skills and can evolve into devoted allies for students with intellectual disabilities. Peer tutoring offers greater verbal interaction, more frequent opportunities to respond and receive feedback, and increased opportunities for learning new skills. *Any student including those with intellectual disabilities feel more comfortable to ask questions to her/his same age peer...*, Resource Teacher-1 from Resource Class-B said. Supporting the fact, two experts who had participated in the study answered as follows: Students with intellectual disabilities can learn a lot of knowledge, attitude, and skills from their classmates...but they have not been mobilized properly to strengthen the learning of children with intellectual disabilities... If these resources are used properly, such attempt not only supports the students with

intellectual disabilities but also minimizes the burden of teachers [Expert-4]. Students without disabilities are more knowledgeable than the children with intellectual disabilities. The former ones can get ample benefit from the latter ones to get access to curricular contents. Therefore, a number of pairs, comprising one non-disabled and one disabled, should be made to mainstream the students with disabilities [Expert-5].

Thus, non-disabled peers of students with intellectual disabilities can be an important source of learning. They can scaffold to learn curricular and co-curricular contents which help to improve academic performance of disable learners. Furthermore, it also makes their relationship stronger, develop democratic culture, and create an inclusive society in the future.

Create cooperative learning environment: Cooperative learning is an effective method for educating students with intellectual disabilities. In cooperative learning setting, a class is divided into a number of groups for collaborative learning. Although the group is concentrated to achieve cooperative goals, each student has a role and each role is valued. Cooperative learning promotes interdependence and serves as an effective means of granting students with intellectual disabilities access to the general education curriculum. But study results show that this technique has not been properly used in Nepalese schools to reinforce students' learning. *Discussion, interaction, and group works are very strong ways to expand the knowledge of students with intellectual disabilities. But such opportunities are rarely provided to them either in resource classroom or in the mainstream classroom...*, Resource Teacher-1 from School-B indicated. *Collaborative learning is an evidence-based intervention for successful learning of students with intellectual disabilities; therefore, it should be used effectively to optimize their access to curricular contents*, Expert-1 notified. Supporting the reality, another expert opined,

Collaborative learning not only improves the learning status of children with intellectual disabilities but also develops “we” feeling, democratic culture, and mutual relationship among all including those with and without disabilities..., therefore, this method should be used as an integral part of teaching learning process [Expert-3].

Collaborative learning is beneficial not only for students with disabilities but nondisabled learners can also get sufficient benefits from it. This technique is useful to inculcate those knowledge, attitudes, and skills that cannot be imparted through official curriculum. Therefore, collaborative learning environment should be created inside the classroom to represent the unrepresented in the learning process.

Formulate alternative learning standards: Students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities cannot achieve learning outcomes as their peers without disabilities. They have poor cognitive abilities as compared to the children with mild and moderate level of intellectual disabilities. They learn slowly and have difficulty in achieving instructional objectives determined in curriculum. Due to these reasons, alternative achievement standards should be determined through an IEP by reflecting the individual needs and abilities of learners having severe and profound types of disabilities. *Some students with intellectual disabilities cannot achieve the intended learning outcomes determined in the curriculum due to their poor cognitive abilities..., therefore, simple and specific learning objectives should be formulated based on their individual learning profile,* Expert-2 answered. *A few students with intellectual disabilities can neither learn curricular contents nor execute instructional activities..., the contents and instructional activities should be simplified by determining alternative learning standards,* Expert-3 informed. In addition, another informant remarked: Objectives, contents, methods, and assessment determined in an official curriculum are not suited to the children with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, these components of curriculum should be accommodated as per the special learning needs of these children to make it accessible [Special Education Teacher-2 from Special School-B].

Alternative learning standards determined by considering special learning needs of the children with disabilities are helpful to maximize their access to educational program. The formal curricula specially prescribed for typically developing learners might be beyond the learnability of the learners with poor cognitive abilities. Instructional activities including assessment procedures for students with intellectual should be conducted based on the alternative achievement standards.

Discussion

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) ensures the rights of individuals with disabilities to education and stresses that member states must guarantee an inclusive education system at all levels, providing these individuals with access to inclusive, high-quality, and free primary education on an equal basis (United Nations, 2006; cited in Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2015). Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens (2019) has mentioned that CWDs shall not be separated from their home and family. Similarly, National Education Policy-2076 has also made a provision of receiving education by children with and without disabilities together under an inclusive setting (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2019). But study results show that almost all the children with intellectual disabilities

have been receiving educational services either in special schools or in self-contained classrooms.

Theoretically, the government advocates for an inclusive education policy, but in reality, it endorses a system where children with intellectual disabilities are placed in segregated resource classes and special education, thereby contradicting its theoretical stance on inclusive education (Human Rights Watch, 2011). This process excludes the children with intellectual disabilities from teaching and learning process though they have been spending their school hours under the same roof with their typically developing peers. Study results also indicate that students with intellectual disabilities must have the sense of belongingness to be an integral part of their classroom. For this, they must be informed about all activities that are held under the guidance of school. These students have difficulty in getting access to an educational program of specific school due to poor cognitive, communicative, and social skills (Hallahan et al., 2012; Shaw & Jankowska, 2018). Some of them might need Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to maximize their access to mainstream classroom. Study findings also reveal that school curriculum should be modified, time should be extended, expanded school year services should be provided, assistive and educational technology should be arranged, and other essential accommodations should be made to ensure the inclusion of these children in mainstream classroom.

Students with intellectual disabilities have difficulties in processing and expressing the received information either in oral or written modes (Vaughn et al., 2018). These students can phenomenally be benefitted from inclusive education because the required services are provided to the children with intellectual disabilities alongside their same age peers in the same classroom on a full-time or part-time basis (Best et al., 2015; Miles & Signal, 2010; cited in Karna, 2015). Nevertheless, the students with intellectual disabilities cannot get benefits to a similar extent from inclusive education since the severity of their disability ranges from mild to profound level (Shaw & Jankowska, 2018). In this regard, research findings depict that partial participation should be institutionalized based on the degree of severity of the disability to optimize their inclusion in education. Furthermore, study results show that multi-tiered supports should also be provided to them on a required basis as indicated by Kirk et al. (2015) and Heward (2013). First of all, all learners including those with intellectual disabilities should be taught in the mainstream classroom by using differentiated instruction, they should be taught either in small group or then individually on a required basis. Some students with intellectual disabilities have difficulty in accessing to general education curriculum. For them, curricular contents need to be broken down into very simple

steps to ensure high success rate in education (Westwood, 2007; Shaw & Jankowska, 2018). Research findings also reveal that more functional contents need to be provided to optimize the access of these children to educational program because a portion of contents encompassed in the curriculum might not be accessible to them.

Failure of ensuring a quality education for these children results in a subsequent increase in social and financial burdens for society, particularly concerning health and social security measures (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Children with intellectual disabilities face difficulty even achieving lower-level cognitive skills. Curricular outcomes, therefore, should be made simpler and more specific to make them achievable. Teachers should have a deeper understanding on the taxonomy of educational objectives (Marzano & Kendal, 2007) and formulate alternative learning standards for those who cannot achieve the learning outcomes offered in an official curriculum. Study results also indicate that students with intellectual disabilities should be taught in the mainstream school by determining alternative learning standards especially for those who cannot achieve educational objectives formulated in the curriculum. If students with special needs are excluded from the mainstream classroom, they end up leading separate academic and social lives that might not align well with their regular routines (Causton & Tracy-Bronson, 2015). Study also shows that the students with poor cognitive abilities need direct instruction about the activities where they are going to participate. On the other hand, research findings reveal that peer support has humongous impact on learning. Non-disabled peers are more knowledgeable and creative and can provide continuous supports to the learners with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, they should be mobilized to ensure the inclusion of cognitively poor children in the learning process

Conclusion

All students including those with intellectual disabilities have equal rights to receive education in the mainstream classroom. When students with poor cognitive abilities are taught with their typically developing peers then they not only get academic benefits but also have chance to understand each other that ultimately helps to create an inclusive society in the future. But educational services for the children with intellectual disabilities have been provided in segregated educational settings in spite of having policy provisions for inclusive education. Consequently, these students are alienated in educational programs today and in the society where they live in the future. Therefore, inclusion of these students in education should be ensured by implementing evidence-based practices in Nepalese schools.

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