

# Policies and Provisions for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Inclusive Education Context

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## Abstract

*This article delves into the policies and provisions designed to aid children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within inclusive classroom environments. Drawing upon a qualitative context analysis through an examination of international declarations and Nepal's national policies, it scrutinizes the legal frameworks and educational guidelines addressing the educational requirements of children with ASD. Key international documents such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Education for All (EFA), and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) are analysed to discern their implications for inclusive education. Moreover, Nepal's national policies, including the National Education System Plan, National Policy and Action Plan Related to People with Disability, and the Inclusive Education Policy for Persons with Disabilities, are assessed to determine their alignment with global initiatives and effectiveness in promoting inclusive practices for children with ASD. The study emphasizes the pivotal role of these policies in shaping inclusive education environments, ensuring access to quality education, and fostering the rights of individuals with ASD to fully participate in society. Limited resources, inadequate support services, a shortage of trained teachers, and knowledge gaps among educators and stakeholders hinder the successful inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Recommendations for policy implementation and future research directions are also deliberated to enhance support for children with ASD in inclusive classroom settings.*

**Key Words:** Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), inclusive education, policies, provisions, legal framework, international declarations

## Introduction

The term "autism" traces its origins to the Greek word "auto," meaning "self." Coined by Austrian psychiatrist Leo Kanner in 1943, autism is a neurological disorder characterized by atypical processing of information, typically manifesting within the first three years of life. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) encompasses a range of pervasive developmental disorders primarily impacting social interactions, language, and behavior. While individuals with autism exhibit diverse characteristics, some assimilate into community settings more easily than others. The evolution of diagnostic terminology underscores the complex nature of ASD. Initially categorized as "pervasive developmental disorders" in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1980, the term "autism spectrum disorder" emerged in 1988, reflecting a broader conceptualization of the condition.

Crucial to understanding autism is familiarity with key definitions. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines autism as a developmental disability significantly affecting communication, social interaction, and behaviour, usually apparent before age three, adversely impacting educational performance. Inclusion, rooted in the belief that education is a fundamental human right, emphasizes equitable access to education for all children, regardless of disability. It advocates transforming schools to accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities through tailored curricula, teaching strategies, and community partnerships.

Inclusive classrooms are equitable classrooms where students are accepted for who they are, and their individual needs are met. Students are not treated in an identical way but rather the needs and interests of each individual student are met, providing them with the necessary tools, conditions and assistance to achieve success and reach their potential (Schwartz & Pollishuke, 2013). All students are

welcome in general education, the first placement options considered are the general education classes in the school that the students would attend if they did not have a disability. Students with and without disabilities participate in shared educational experiences while pursuing individually appropriate learning outcomes with necessary supports. Educational experiences are designed to enhance valued life outcomes that seek an individualized balance between both the academic-functional and the social-personal aspect of schooling. From the philosophical perspective, there are four assumptions underlying inclusive education (Peters, 2007).

Over the years, Nepal's National Policy on Disability have been formed with the goal of supporting the rights and well-being of people with disabilities. These policies include a wide variety of topics, including education, healthcare, employment, and social activities, and they have played a significant role in increasing the social and economic inclusion of people with disabilities. This section will concentrate on the many policies that have been put in place in Nepal to accommodate the educational requirements of people with disabilities.

In assumption, the understanding about policy and provision of Inclusive education for individuals with disabilities in Nepal are complex and multifaceted. The common barriers and misunderstanding about lack of policy and provision identified by the data collection its included poverty, lack of access to education, social stigma and discrimination, lack of accessible infrastructure, lack of healthcare resources, lack of government support, lack of trained professionals, lack of parental knowledge, and lack of proper diagnosis and treatment. These barriers can make it difficult for individuals with disabilities particularly children with autism to access in inclusive education and succeed in school.

#### **Global Frameworks:**

In the realm of Special Needs Education, inclusion pertains to providing equal educational opportunities and removing barriers hindering participation. However, challenges in implementing inclusive education persist, raising questions about its practicality and efficacy, particularly regarding teaching students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. The evolution of human civilization speaks of a certain pattern of development: society and education determine each other. The education system depends on what kind of society exists; at the same time, as the educational system develops, the society reaches this level of development.

In Nepal, awareness and diagnosis of autism are limited, with estimates suggesting 250,000 to 300,000 individuals affected, including 60,000 to 90,000 severely impacted. Initiatives like the Autism Awareness for Inclusion and Rights-Based project by Autism Care Nepal Society aim to raise awareness and promote inclusive education, addressing the scarcity of resources and knowledge surrounding autism. This article examines the imperative of inclusive education for children with ASD, exploring strategies, challenges, and the evolving landscape of autism awareness and support in Nepal. By elucidating the intersection of education, disability rights, and societal inclusion, this research contributes to fostering inclusive learning environments for children with autism.

#### **Nepalese Context**

In Nepal, people with disabilities face challenges not only in accessing education but also in obtaining essential services such as healthcare and employment. Recognizing the rights and needs of individuals with disabilities, the Nepali government has taken initiatives to promote inclusion and accessibility. In 2017, the country embraced the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) with the purpose of protecting and advancing the rights of individuals with disabilities. The government has also implemented various policies and laws to support inclusive education, including the Inclusive Education Policy (2018) and the Disability Rights and Protection Act (2017). Despite the ongoing efforts, people with disabilities in Nepal face several challenges. Restricted access to education and healthcare, along with discrimination and negative attitudes towards them, remain major obstacles.

So, the context of Nepal, students with autism face numerous challenges despite some opportunities such as allowances, scholarships, and reservation in government jobs. Both general and special education teachers encounter difficulties in inclusive classrooms, where efforts to include

students with autism are hindered by various issues. These challenges include limited classroom access, rigid curriculum structures, lack of support services, shortage of highly trained teachers and teaching materials, as well as knowledge and attitude gaps among educators, parents, and community stakeholders. Moreover, Nepal lacks well-trained specialists for diagnosing autism, leading to underestimations of its prevalence and traditional exclusion of students with autism from mainstream education settings. Thus, there is a need to identify and address the challenges related to including children with autism in inclusive classrooms in Nepal.

### **Challenges and Gaps**

In Nepal, autism was recognized as a developmental disability only recently in 2017 under the Disability Rights Act. However, further exploration of autism within the context of inclusive education is necessary due to the lack of research in this area. Understanding about the policy and provision of inclusive education for children with autism in Nepal with the ways to include children with autism in inclusive classrooms, along with the barriers and challenges faced by teachers, is crucial. Moreover, many disabled individuals in Nepal reside in rural areas with inadequate services and infrastructure. In Nepal, people with disabilities encounter significant obstacles in accessing education, healthcare, employment, and other essential services (UNICEF, 2021). As per the 2011 National Population and Housing Census of Nepal, the number of people with disabilities was 513,321, constituting 1.94% of the total population.

Limited infrastructure and resources, including accessible facilities, transportation, and assistive technology, pose significant barriers to education for people with disabilities in Nepal (UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, societal prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities can impede their access to education and employment opportunities (UNICEF, 2021). To address these challenges and promote inclusion of people with disabilities, Nepal has taken steps in recent years. The Nepal Disability Rights Act, passed in 2017, aims to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of people with disabilities, including access to education and employment opportunities (Government of Nepal, 2017).

This research aims to benefit inclusive and general education teachers who work with autistic children, as well as stakeholders involved in ensuring their educational access and success in inclusive settings. Understanding about the policy and provision, interlinkage with the stakeholders and government policy makers, curriculum rigidity and the need for differentiation pose significant challenges for the successful inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Therefore, the findings of this research inform various organizations, rehabilitation centres, special schools, integrated schools, inclusive schools and mainstream school about the necessary measures to support autistic students effectively. By addressing these challenges, the research aims to contribute to the development of inclusive education policies and practices in Nepal, benefiting both educators and students with autism.

Overcoming these problems needs a promise to creating a more inclusive educational environment with addressing policy and provision. Understanding about the related policy and provision, infra structure investments, training and awareness campaigns, and targeted regulations can assist in closely addressing differences in education, particularly for understated populations. Increasing teacher readiness via training programs, resolving policy implementation challenges, and supporting inclusion in curriculum creation are all critical steps toward fulfilling inclusive education's transformational potential in Nepal. As the country complies with international obligations, collaborative efforts are required to turn the goal of inclusive education a reality, thereby propelling the country toward social development and prosperity.

### **Reviews and Discussion**

Inclusive education encompasses both a philosophical stance and an educational approach aimed at providing quality educational opportunities to all children, regardless of their abilities. The philosophical aspect emphasizes the right of every child to access quality education, while the practical aspect seeks to ensure equal access to academic and social experiences for all students, regardless of their abilities.

Inclusive classrooms bring together children with diverse abilities in the same educational

environment, fostering connections among students and providing collaborative support for their success (Custom–Theoharis and Theoharis, 2008). Schwartz and Pollishuke (2013) emphasize that inclusive classrooms prioritize meeting the individual needs and interests of each student, providing them with the necessary tools and conditions to achieve their full potential. From a philosophical perspective, Peters (2007) highlights four underlying assumptions of inclusive education: recognizing the diverse needs of all students, the responsibility of the general education system to be responsive to these needs, the provision of high-quality academic curriculum and instruction, and the collaboration between schools and communities to create inclusive citizens.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests. The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) categorizes ASD into four related pervasive developmental disorders: autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Children with ASD exhibit a range of characteristics, including impaired social interaction, communication deficits, repetitive behaviors, insistence on sameness, unusual responsiveness to sensory stimuli, uneven skill development, and problem behaviors. Despite the historical misconception linking parenting style to autism, current biomedical research focuses on neuropathology, genetic inheritance, and nervous system abnormalities as potential causes of ASD (Williams & Williams, 2011).

Children with autism present unique challenges in the classroom, often exhibiting behaviours such as focusing on irrelevant stimuli, showing little interest in teachers and peers, and experiencing sudden meltdowns involving aggression or self-injury. Effective education for these students requires meticulously planned, skilfully delivered, and continuously evaluated instruction (Loftin, Odom, & Lantz, 2007). Early Intensive Behaviour Intervention (EIBI) has shown promise in helping some children with autism develop communication, language, and social skills necessary for success in general education settings (Dawson et al., 2004).

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), as demonstrated in the Lovas early intervention project, offers a scientific approach to instruction by utilizing principles of positive reinforcement and systematic skill teaching (Lovaas, 1987). Another method, the discrete trial method (DTT), employs a structured approach to teaching various skills, including language, through repetitive practice (Smith, 2001). Visual supports, including picture activity schedules and social stories, are instrumental in aiding children with autism in learning and participating in classroom activities (Reynhout & Carter, 2006). These strategies provide visual cues and prompt to enhance skill performance and understanding of social situations. Educational programs for children with autism should focus on improving communication, social, academic, behavioral, and daily living skills within a structured and consistent classroom environment (Odom et al., 2010).

While some children with autism benefit from inclusion in general education classrooms for improved social integration (Odom et al., 2010), others may require highly individualized instruction focused on essential skills for success in such settings (Schreibman et al., 2015). Autonomy is a critical aspect of daily life for individuals with autism, encompassing decision making, problem solving, and self-management. However, due to communicative, cognitive, and motor difficulties, achieving autonomy is challenging for many individuals with autism, often requiring support from caretakers (Charman, 2003). Autism Europe emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning programs that promote the development of social, personal, self-care, and self-advocacy skills to enhance autonomy and enable individuals with autism to lead independent lives within their communities (Autism Europe, 2020).

### **Policies and Provisions**

Nepal, as a member of the international community, adheres to various UN conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989, Education for All (EFA) 1990, the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), and the

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD-2006). The CRC, being the most ratified of all UN Human Rights treaties, emphasizes international cooperation to improve the living conditions of children worldwide, including their right to education. The EFA conference in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 aimed to make primary education accessible to all children, while the Salamanca conference in Spain in 1994 focused on enhancing inclusive education for children with special needs, including those with disabilities. Subsequent meetings in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 reaffirmed the commitment to provide quality primary education for all children, particularly marginalized groups.

The UN Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 1993, underscore the importance of inclusive education for persons with disabilities, ensuring that the quality of special education reflects the same standards as general education. The UNCRPD, adopted in 2006, represents a significant shift in the perception of persons with disabilities, recognizing them as rights-holders capable of claiming their rights and participating fully in society. This convention emphasizes the need for adaptations to enable persons with disabilities to exercise their rights effectively and identifies areas where rights have been violated and require reinforcement. These international declarations align with Nepal's national policies on inclusive education, particularly concerning children with special needs, including autism.

Nepal's commitment to inclusive education and special needs is evident in its national policies, laws, and documents. These policy instruments play crucial roles in reflecting government decisions, ensuring accountability, shaping societal perspectives, and documenting societal progress over time. The adoption and partial implementation of various laws and policies highlight Nepal's dedication to providing equal educational opportunities for individuals with special needs.

**The Constitution of Nepal, 2072 (2015):** The constitution emphasizes the right to basic education for every individual (Article 31, verse 1), mandating compulsory and free basic education, as well as free education up to the secondary level for all citizens, including those with varied disabilities (Article 31, verses 2, 3, and 4).

**National Education System Plan (NESP) – 2028 (1971-76):** While not explicitly mentioning autism, the NESP clearly advocates for special and inclusive education, tailoring educational approaches based on the type of disabilities.

**National Policy and Action Plan Related to People with Disability, 2063:** This policy commits to providing convenient and appropriate education for children with all types of disabilities, emphasizing inclusive education to enhance educational opportunities and quality for children with disabilities, including those with autism.

**Inclusive Education Policy for Persons with Disabilities – 2073:** This policy, replacing the Special Education Policy of 2053, aligns with global movements for inclusive education. It emphasizes free education based on merit and eligibility, creating disability-friendly learning environments, and preparing individuals with disabilities, including autism, as capable human resources for the labour market.

**Compulsory and Free Education Act, 2075:** is legislated to implement the constitutionally assured fundamental right to education, and provision of free and compulsory school education without evidence-based analysis, planning and budgeting. These provisions are oriented toward creating an environment where all citizens can get basic education to enhance equal and just society.

**School Sector Development Plan, Nepal (SSDP 2016 – 2023):** This plan addresses disparities in access and participation in basic education, focusing on the inclusion of children with disabilities. It aims to consolidate and institutionalize support systems for children with disabilities, reviewing and updating guidelines related to types of disabilities.

**Disability Rights Act 2017:** Endorsed by the parliament, this legislation, with a human rights-based approach, replaces the Disabled Protection and Welfare Act of 1982. The Act stresses the rights of persons with disabilities, advocating for inclusive education and placement of children with disabilities, such as those with autism, in inclusive classrooms, requiring curricular differentiation and accommodation. This marks a significant step toward inclusive education in Nepal.

These policy measures collectively underline Nepal's dedication to providing inclusive education for individuals with special needs, promoting equal opportunities, and safeguarding the rights



of all citizens, including those with disabilities. Policy provides some insights to the general education teachers and inclusive education teachers, students and novice researchers.

Policy should be made to bridge the gap among special schools, inclusive schools and general school maintaining school's wise standard and quality in inclusive education and special education. The government should make rule to give special incentives to all general, special and inclusive teachers who enable their students to achieve expected achievement and skills.

Despite government initiatives aimed at addressing these concerns, there is still a pressing need in Nepal to promote inclusion and equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Disability is a significant concern in Nepal, impacting a significant proportion of the population. Numerous individuals with disabilities encounter hindrances to fundamental services, such as healthcare, education, and employment. People residing in rural areas face challenges in obtaining support as individuals with disabilities. Although the Nepali government has implemented policies and laws to address their needs, there is still room for improvement in terms of promoting inclusivity and accessibility. Therefore, this study aims to examine the obstacles faced by individuals with disabilities when pursuing education in Nepal and explore different policy provision and programs that can help.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

In conclusion, the examination of policies and provisions for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in inclusive classroom settings reveals a complex landscape shaped by international declarations and Nepal's national policies. The analysis underscores the crucial role of legal frameworks and educational guidelines in addressing the educational needs of children with ASD and promoting inclusive practices. International agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Education for All (EFA), and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) emphasize the rights of individuals with ASD to access quality education and participate fully in society. Nepal's national policies, including the National Education System Plan, National Policy and Action Plan Related to People with Disability, and the Inclusive Education Policy for Persons with Disabilities, reflect a commitment to inclusive education and special needs, aiming to provide equal educational opportunities and promote disability-friendly learning environments.

Despite these policies, challenges persist in implementing inclusive education for children with ASD in Nepal. Limited resources, inadequate support services, a shortage of trained teachers, and knowledge gaps among educators and stakeholders hinder the successful inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Additionally, the lack of well-trained specialists for diagnosing autism contributes to underestimations of its prevalence and traditional exclusion from mainstream education settings. The recent recognition of autism as a developmental disability under the Disability Rights Act of 2017 marks a significant step towards inclusive education in Nepal. However, further research and concerted efforts are needed to address the challenges and barriers faced by children with ASD in inclusive classroom settings. Recommendations for policy implementation and future research directions include enhancing support services, providing specialized training for educators, fostering community awareness, and promoting collaboration between schools and communities.

### **Policy Level**

Until and unless the policies are implemented, they do not have special values, so findings of my study showed that there is not clear provision of inclusive education for the children with autism in general schools. But in the special schools, and inclusive schools there are a little improve in good provision So, the government should make concrete policy to inclusive education in community schools /general schools especially, while teaching children with disability / children with autism and if possible other students too, as far as possible.

There should be provision for special training and education for the all type of teachers about the special and inclusive education and regular supervision whether teachers are conducting Inclusive education or not. So, high level personnel should observe the general schools and teachers about the current policy and provision regarding children with Autism.

Policies should be made to bridge the gap among special schools, inclusive schools and general school maintaining school's wise standard and quality in inclusive education and special education.

The government should make rule to give special incentives to all general, special and inclusive teachers who enable their students to achieve expected achievement and skills, on the basis of the students' performance in the general, special and inclusive schools about the special and inclusive education. And in the practice level, Inclusive education teachers and stakeholder should clearly tell the importance of different policy and provision about inclusive education and its well practice to the all school staff and they should motivate the teachers to study in inclusive setup. The participants in my research said that they were familiar with the positive aspects of Inclusive Education and were intrinsically and intrinsically motivated to include it from early classes.

All students come to school with diverse needs and abilities, so no students are fundamentally different. It is the responsibilities of the general education system to be responsive to all students. A responsive general education system provides high expectations and standards, quality academic curriculum and instruction that are flexible and relevant an accessible environment, and teachers who are well prepared to address the educational needs of all students. Progress in general education is a process evidenced by school and community working together to create citizens for an inclusive society who are educated to enjoy the full benefits, rights, and experiences of societal life (Peters, 2007) (p.99).

The policies and provisions examined in this article underscore the importance of inclusive education for children with ASD, aiming to ensure their access to quality education, foster their rights to participate fully in society, and create inclusive learning environments that accommodate diverse needs and abilities. By addressing the challenges and gaps in policy implementation, Nepal can progress towards a more inclusive education system that benefits all students, including those with autism.

Overall, further research is needed to fully understand and address the barriers to education for individuals with Autism in Nepal. This research can inform the development of policies, programs, and interventions aimed at improving access to education for this marginalised population.

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