



Reflective Story on Diversity and Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This reflective article explores the current scenario of diversity and inclusion through the narration of a deaf ethnic child. Self-reflection is taken as an instrument for behavioural modification since the author is aware of its significance in education. This study aims to explore the experiences and implementation of inclusive education through the author's personal teaching experiences. The article employs a reflective narration of the author working as a novice teacher in a school exercising to incorporate deaf children into mainstream courses. The emphasis is on Krishna, a Dalit youngster with hearing difficulties, who had challenges in adaptation owing to cultural, social and educational obstacles. The results showed the obstacles encountered by such children who had to face social isolation, communication obstacles and insufficient educator training. The author's intervention in Krishna's metamorphosis underscores the necessity of helpful learning environments. The article links Krishna's experiences to wider socio-economic and cultural challenges, indicating that inclusive education is necessary for structural reforms in teacher training, cultural sensitivity and familial support. The results underscore the necessity of embracing diversity and enacting effective inclusive education policies to cultivate equal learning environments for all children.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Deaf Children, Diversity and Inclusion, Teacher Reflection, Cultural Sensitivity

Introduction

Pursuing a reflective process is the gist of education in this era. Observing and evaluating one's experiences and behavior and getting feedback are connected to self-efficacy, self regulation and motivation (Bandura, 2004). Reflective cognitive processing is a prerequisite for changing behavior: critical thinking leads to revised action (Baumeister et al. 2007). As a theoretical concept, reflection has been widely discussed in the field of education. It has been described as a method for problem-solving by linking previous experiences to a



chain of ideas and aiming for a conclusion (Dewey, 1933), and as an intellectual and affective response to an experience leading to a revised understanding (Boud et al., 1996). As a learning process, it is argued that reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built, thus reassessing, interpreting and validating the foundations of our perspectives, actions and choices (Mezirow, 1990). In this article, I have tried to explore how diversity and inclusive education in case of a deaf, ethnic child is understood, experienced and enacted in Nepalese context using a reflective story based on my past experiences when I was a novice teacher.

Context/Background of the Story

“I live in a cocoon of social making

Peeping out at the world from behind a curtain.”

Asha Hans (Hans & Patri, 2003: 5)

A focus on disability in global development not only raises questions of diverse local interpretations of the same issue, but also the need to accept the diversity of needs within this group depending on both the nature of impairment and cultural context. The linguistic translation, let alone personal understanding, of new, often ‘northern’, terminologies and ideas can be problematic, and the English word ‘disability’ does not escape this conceptual tension. When considering understandings of, approaches to, and impacts of inclusive education, the inevitable diversity and complexity in a context of this size must be taken into account. In Nepal, government has been making a number of attempts for last five decades (CERID, 2004), for inclusion in education but such attempts are not enough to meet the diverse needs of children with disabilities even though inclusive education is defined as a process of developing educational system that ensures opportunity for receiving education in a non-discriminatory environment in their own community by respecting the multicultural differences (Curriculum Development Center, 2007). Inclusive education believes in the principle that all children can learn if they are given appropriate environment and support to address their needs and recognizes the importance of the ownership of the community in schools (DoE, 2011). DOE has also identified the target groups for inclusive education as: girl child and women, children with disability, *Dalit* children, minority ethnic groups, street children, children affected by conflict, children affected by trafficking and sexual abuse, children severely affected by poverty, children of bonded laborers, children in jail, children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, and child laborers (DOE, 2011).

Despite being all policies and national, international memorandum of understandings – that look perfect in papers, I could not experience practice of inclusive education in the school where I used to work in mid 2000s' specially in the case of a deaf, ethnic child. I started my teaching profession as a primary level science teacher in 2005 and right after a year, I was assigned as a hostel warden for primary level students. The school used to receive deaf students in primary level, however the school was a normal, institutional school. They had around 15 deaf students accommodated in two classrooms and managed by two sign language trained ladies teachers. There was a practice of multigrade teaching for deaf classes. However, the



school was planning for integrating such students in normal classes. So, all primary level teaching faculty members were made compulsory to learn sign language from those two teachers after the school for one hour. I was fortunate to learn sign language for four months with great passion and enthusiasm.

Story

A bright, sunny day on the first week of June in 2006 brought us a surprise in the school. An European tourist from Germany came to the school with a boy aged 11 years old with dark complexion and his father. The tourist found the boy on the way to Baglung from Pokhara begging for money. He immediately found that the boy could not hear and speak. Finally, he could contact his father with the help of police authorities who wanted his son to go to Kathmandu and study in a special school. Since he could not afford for his son's education, he was seeking help from the tourist. The kind hearted tourist immediately took a bus and brought the boy for admission in our school after getting recommendation from some locals. The boy was admitted in the hostel and the tourist and his father returned back.

The boy (here forth, Krishna, pseudo name) was from Dalit community. Because of his hearing impairments and poor economic condition of the family, he was abandoned. When he came to the school, his physical condition was not good. His hair was trimmed, nails cut and cleaned thoroughly and after two days, he attended the class. The teachers found Krishna so restless, arrogant and notorious during his first week of the class. However, slowly he managed to behave in a proper order and understand and communicate in sign language. The real problem for Krishna arose when the school decided to terminate special class of the deaf and include them in normal class. It was just about a month Krishna was transferred into grade one along with normal students. The other students in the class were of age 6-7 years but he was significantly bigger in size and age. The students could not communicate with him and understand his needs so do Krishna. So, he was literally thrown on the last bench alone. They did not share tiffin with him, did not include him in sports in recess and did not help him write assignments in his diary. Moreover, the grade teacher was not fluent in sign language and had problems handling him in the classroom.

The happy looking, progressing boy, Krishna, in the special class suddenly looked unhappy, sad and gloomy in the integrated classroom. Being responsible for primary level students in the hostel, I realized that my duty had been added and I had to bear more responsibilities for Krishna. I was a novice teacher with enthusiastic spirits that made me learn sign language effectively and faster than others. This had become a good tool for me to communicate with Krishna. Within few days, I recognized that he needed more food that what was being provided. I took him to a cafeteria and ordered for Momo. He liked it and the visit to cafeteria became frequent. In study class, I kept him just in front of my eyes. I shifted his bed into my room and made him follow daily routine properly. This intimacy had created some personal problems to me but I was very happy for Krishna since he was transforming in his habits and learning a lot. I requested to the school principal to manage class in such a way that sign language trained teacher would come to Krishna's class for two periods in a day. This had



helped the grade teacher of the class as well as the students to understand, cooperate and include Krishna as an integral member of the class.

Krishna showed a keen interest and skills in playing cricket. We noticed it while senior boys were playing cricket and he was serving them. I talked to the cricket coach and requested him in person to make necessary arrangements for his training. After some days, I could see him in regular practice sessions. At the end of that academic year, Krishna was double promoted to grade three. He seemed happy and was enjoying his second innings of life that led him from darkness to brighter future. He was being funded by the tourist from Germany, his father came to take him in Dashain and returned him to hostel after festivals and, his family also looked satisfied with his performance and transformation. This story comes to an end with a scene where Krishna was playing for his school in inter school cricket tournament on last week of February 2006 and was holding a ball in his hand being ready to bowl against the opponent aiming to take wickets with his special Yorker delivery!

Different Perspectives of the Story

Socio-Economic Perspective

Financing and supporting educational services for students with special needs is a primary concern for all education stake holders, regardless of available resources and family class as supported by Dyson & Forlin (2013). A strong relation exists between all kinds of academic variables and the family's socio economic status. Schmid (2013) supports that the influence of family income of parents contributed to the implementation of inclusive education. The three categories of family classes according to Coleman include: the high class families, middle class families and low class families. Each of these family classes influence implementation of inclusive education differently. The children living in more economically challenged families have been noted to have more emotional problems and this is why children with special needs in education from economically stable families have shown an outstanding personality thus socialize and mingle freely with their counterparts in regular schools. In case of Krishna, his parents could not afford for his special need education due to poor economic condition. They had problems to manage hand to mouth daily, let his education go astray. The hearing impairment of Krishna was also considered as a curse and result of sin from past life. That's why, the whole family was socially abused and neglected. Moreover, they belonged to Dalit community due to which prevailing superstitions in the society abstain them from many social traditions. So, the family abandoned Krishna so as to remove some social negligence to the family cause by his disability.

Cultural Perspective

A family's cultural heritage shapes its reaction to/and interpretation of disabilities. Disability being a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon (Linan-Thompson & Jean, 1997), families from culturally diverse backgrounds may have differing perspectives on the meaning of exceptionality. Different cultures perceive the cause of disability differently. Families from different cultures may express a belief in fate, spiritual reasons, violation of social taboos, or intergenerational reprisals as possible causes for the child's disability (Hansan,



Lynch, & Wayman, 1990). At the risk of stereotyping, some families may attribute a youngster's disability to "God's will". Krishna's disability was also regarded as curse and sin from his past life. So, he was forced to leave his home and came on the street for begging. He was not accepted culturally in the society. When he came to the school, he was ignored by his friends in the beginning since he came from the different cultural background. His habits and manners did not match with others so he got neglected in the class. As the time passes by, learning in this multicultural setting benefited all the students and they excelled in multiple dynamics.

Philosophical Perspective

This reflective story was guided by Vyogotsky theory of proximal development (1987-1998). This theory discusses learning and teaching of challenged children as a shared process in a responsive social context. According to Vyogotsky, children can perform better when they have proper assistance from the entire community. Vyogotsky advocated the process of 'scaffolding'. In this context, children with special needs in education are given support by families and which influence the implementation of inclusive education in terms of family's economic status, family attitude, family religious beliefs and parental level of education in collaboration with the school. Vyogotsky theory is applicable in this study because when all the concerned personalities like Krishna's family, teachers, friends, hostel warden and school authorities embrace inclusive education and see the importance of teaching Krishna, he would realize his full potential and interact in the learning process.

Educational Perspective

Level of parents' education greatly influences the implementation of inclusive education as it influences parents' knowledge, beliefs, values and goals about child rearing (UNESCO 2009). According to Muga (2016), highly educated parents make positive decisions of taking learners with special needs in education to regular schools. Open and regular communication is crucial to implementation of inclusive education between schools, parents and the wider community for easy access to the school information in relation to inclusion and this will only apply to parents who are well educated. Due to lack of education attainment by Krishna's parents, they could not understand its importance and could not manage to provide adequate education to him. He was left behind in darkness making him physically and socially paralyzed. So, education in a family plays a vital role specially and densely for families with children having disabilities. Not only family, if the teachers are not well trained and could not understand their students' feelings and necessity, they could not address such students academically. So, teachers for children with disabilities and also from ignored, suppressed marginalized ethnic communities should be well trained and well equipped with science and art for incorporating such children in mainstream and inclusive education,

Issues of Diversity Inherent into the Story

The education system that engages diversity, includes all learners, and seeks equity is essential for preparing civically engaged adults and for creating a society that recognizes the contributions of all people. Teaching for diversity refers to acknowledging a range of



differences in the classroom. Teaching for inclusion signifies embracing difference. Teaching for equity allows the differences to transform the way we think, teach, learn and act such that experiences and ways of being are handled with fairness and justice. These ideas complement each other and enhance educational opportunities for all students when simultaneously engaged. But in the case of Krishna, he was found neglected by his family members, society and education system as well. Due to lack of proper education and poor economic condition, he was abandoned from the family. His feelings was not understood by his peers and teachers and he was not able to express himself due to lack of confidence created by the dominance of his circumstances.

Krishna could not speak and hear, but he was equally capable of doing other chores. His uniqueness was marked as his disability. People forgot that a lotus also blossoms in between a dirty pond. They were not bothered to find out potential laden inside him. His diverse nature was unnoticed and neglected. He was also from Dalit family, so the society did not make his priorities into basic preferences. His family could not afford his medical and special need education expenses, so he was left alone, not cared and cured properly. The government also could not identify such children in the society and manage to provide education at their reach. The government budget and policy is leaking somewhere in either ways. The grade teacher of Krishna's class was not so well trained due to which she was not able to communicate with him and understand his feelings. So, he was literally dumped into the last bench of the class. His peers, being younger than him, from different community, different culture and different perspectives were not ready to accept him as a member of their classroom society. This is all due to lack of knowledge about respecting diversity, knowing the importance of inclusive education and not realizing how differently able people like Krishna can transform his life if they are adequately trained and educated.

So, diversity issues regarding socio-economic perspectives, lack of knowledge about importance of inclusive education, lack of budget and policy implementation, lack of respect for multiculturalism and accepting brotherhood irrespective of race, caste and gender were found deep rooted in our society as we peep our society from the lens of Krishna's story.

Ideas for Addressing the Issue

Our society and even schools feature differences in ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religion, reading level, athletic ability, background, gender, personality, and much more. Strong awareness programs teach educators to value the unique aspects of what makes each student different, and helps them embrace those differences in the classroom. The presence of diversity in the classroom allows students to consider perspectives and opinions beyond those they've already formed or were shaped in early life by family and friends. By presenting students with viewpoints far different from their own, it gives them the opportunity to think critically about their own beliefs and examine the world in fresh ways. As noted by an article in Scientific American, exposure to diversity alters the way individuals think by promoting creativity and innovation, as well as decision-making and problem-solving skills. As the article



summarizes, “Diversity jolts us into cognitive action in ways that homogeneity simply does not.”

Three imperatives make it essential for us to address issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity:

1. Difference is an essential part of our history and current reality. Dealing with human diversity and differential status is intractable due to our national history of racism and tensions between individual freedom and the common good.
2. Difference is an unstoppable part of our future. Classrooms are increasingly diverse and demography assures that this trend will continue.
3. Diversity and inclusion improve teaching and learning. People learn and enrich their abilities to think critically and creatively as they engage in conversations across difference, especially when all learners’ abilities and attributes are embraced.

Inclusive teaching strategies are intended to ensure that all students feel supported such that they freely learn and explore new ideas, feel safe to express their views in a civil manner, and respected as individuals and members of groups. Intentionally incorporating inclusive teaching strategies helps students view themselves as people who belong to the community of learners in a classroom and university. When students enter the professional world, they join a vast and diverse workforce. Interacting with people of all different backgrounds and mindsets can present a challenge without prior exposure to diversity, especially at a younger age. Companies are taking note of their employees’ ability to handle diversity with grace and maturity as it is vital that employees are able to work with people from diverse backgrounds.

Besides, teachers and educators should be well trained for addressing diversity in their institutions. As it has been discussed, diversity in the classroom has numerous positive benefits for students, but how can educators ensure their pupils are getting the most out of interacting with their diverse peers? Well-trained educators are equipped with the tools to encourage the exchange of ideas and interpersonal understanding. No matter what level of education, teachers can utilize their knowledge and strategies on respecting and recognizing diversity and implementing inclusive education to benefit their classrooms. For an educator, understanding cultural diversity in the classroom is a crucial part of being able to anticipate where certain lessons might lead, or any issues that might arise between students of different backgrounds.

Educators can establish a tone of inclusion, emphasizing that all perspectives are valuable. An educator who properly creates a culturally responsive environment will have fostered a classroom where students become respectful and understanding of cultures different from their own. Those students are typically more willing to listen respectfully to different viewpoints, rather than mock, scorn, or fear the unfamiliar. The best way for educators to achieve this is to teach students that people who do not look the same as them—or who come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, follow different religious traditions, speak different languages, or have a different sexual orientation or gender identity—are still just the same as them on the inside. Learning about one’s own culture is just as important as learning about others when it comes to developing cultural understanding among students. Educators



with a strong teaching background can facilitate projects for their students that encourage them to get to know their own history.

In recent years, schools have enacted zero-tolerance policies in an attempt to curb bullying, harassment, and intimidation. However, the tide is now shifting toward zero-indifference policies instead. Zero-indifference is an alternative that promotes safety in schools by consistently and firmly addressing disrespectful behavior. Zero-indifference allows the teacher to use culturally insensitive moments as opportunities for learning and understanding.

Educational Implication

Diversity is generally understood to encompass race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, and political and religious beliefs. And while in the past it has focused on strengthening inter-cultural tolerance, new ideas about diversity and inclusion have developed, shifting the focus towards enriching human learning and experience, so-called 'unity in diversity.' Gurin proposes three major types of outcomes that are influenced by diversity in education. Learning outcomes refer to active learning processes in which students become involved. Democracy outcomes refer to the ways in which education prepares students to become involved as active participants in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse and complex. Gurin (1999) suggests that three major categories-citizenship engagement, racial/cultural engagement, and compatibility of differences-characterize democracy outcomes. The last category of outcomes is related to the ability of students to live and work effectively in a diverse society.

Exploring differences enriches the learning experience. Studies have demonstrated that fostering diversity in the classroom has a huge impact on student performance. According to research conducted by Queens University of Charlotte, students achieve more, and work harder, in multicultural environments. Also, when lesson plans reflect the students and their varied backgrounds, they develop a deeper knowledge of a subject as they explore it from varying perspectives. This equips students with a broader understanding and opens their minds to deeper insights. Diverse study environments also drive creativity when interpreting and using knowledge, data and facts. Group activities with diverse group members helps create a positive atmosphere and group dynamic for creative and collaborative learning. Bringing diverse students together helps with critical thinking or problem-solving, especially when applied to real world business problems. Studies have also shown that having diverse classrooms help develop tolerance and a greater sense of security when in environments with other foreign cultures present. It also helps students learn about other languages and cultures, encouraging them to be interculturally sensitive and prepare them to become potential, capable citizen of the nation.

Conclusion

The narrative of Krishna, as recounted by the novice teacher underscores the vital importance of inclusive education, especially within the broad cultural and socio-economic landscape of Nepal. Krishna's experience illustrates how insufficient teacher preparation, cultural stigmas, and inadequate family support may hinder the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream education. Despite this constraint, the story shows the transformative



capacity of inclusive practices when students receive enough assistance, both within and beyond the classroom. By fostering an environment that recognizes and addresses the unique needs of students like Krishna, it is demonstrated that inclusive education is not only about policy but about meaningful action at the grassroots level. The awareness of teachers, adequate training in sign language, and community involvement were crucial in enhancing Krishna's academic and social experiences. This narrative promotes a comprehensive strategy for inclusive education, emphasising collaboration among educators, families, and policymakers to establish a more equal learning environment. It demands the assessment of current systems to guarantee that all students, irrespective of their abilities or origins, have the opportunity to flourish and achieve their maximum potential. Eventually, embracing diversity is crucial for cultivating inclusive, supportive, and effective education for everyone.

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