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Curriculum Differentiation Practice: A Case Study of Visual Impairments

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Abstract

Curriculum signifies a holistic plan including the objectives, content, strategy, and assessment system. It is the backbone of the inclusive education system of the nation. Everyone has the right to education from the perspective of human rights and child rights. There are diverse backgrounds in the classrooms of Nepalese schools. One of the diversity is visual impairments. Visual impairment can be caused by loss of vision, causing the eyes not to be able to see objects as clearly as usual. It can also be due to visual field loss, which makes it impossible to see a wide area as usual without moving the eyes or turning the head. To secure their rights, the nation provides the proper education. Curriculum differentiation practice is one of the best ways to inclusive process. Regarding this, exploring the present practice of curriculum differentiation and exploring its major problems are objectives of the research which provide guidelines to complete the study. With the support of socio-cultural theory and multiple intelligence theory, this research is held. A qualitative case study approach based on this study including interview and non-participation observation techniques of information generation explores the real practice of curriculum differentiation in the case of visual impairments. Lack of proper training, resources, culturally reflected curricula, and traditional assessment systems are some problems of differentiated practice where the braille script, assistive technology, individualized educational plans and peer support, and inclusive practice along with sensitization and awareness are some better practices of it. To reduce the barrier of differentiated practice, regular teacher training, increasing participation of stakeholders in the curriculum development process, resource allocation, and the assessment system should be reformed. By doing it the curriculum's differentiated practice ensures inclusion.

Keywords: curriculum differentiation, inclusion, information technology, visual impairments, zone of proximal development

Introduction

Differentiation means changing the conventional curriculum by adapting processes, skills, content, and learning environments to suit gifted and talented students (NSW DET 2003; Maker 1996). It should include extension and enrichment programs to extend the curriculum to develop students' skills and abilities to a level

of complexity equivalent to their cognitive abilities (Braggett, 1997) (Ronsky-Pavia, 2010). Curriculum differentiation is the process of modifying or adapting the curriculum to the different ability levels of students in the same class (UNESCO, 2004). It refers to designing and delivering curriculum materials that meet the diverse learning needs of students. In Nepal, curriculum differentiation is becoming increasingly important as schools seek to provide quality education to all students, including those with special needs. One example of curriculum differentiation in Nepal is implementing inclusive education, which aims to provide equal opportunities for all students regardless of their abilities or disabilities. This approach involves adapting teaching methods and materials to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Similarly, with the increasing availability of digital tools and resources, teachers can use technology to personalize learning experiences for students and provide them with access to a wide range of learning materials.

The most commonly used approach to meeting diverse learning needs, both domestically and internationally, is to place students into groups of homogeneous ability using a selection process called 'placement'. 'Grade,' 'attendance,' or 'supervision' based on the grouping of acquired knowledge (Francome & Hewitt, 2020; Jaremus et al., 2020) (Marks et al., 2021). This approach can be used in case of the differently abled children. There are various differentiated techniques among their content, strategy, environment, and assessment system are more important. Differentiated instruction offers a way to benefit from a heterogeneous group. Such instruction provides elements that promote a positive learning environment, including diversity in ways that allow individuals to grow academically based on their abilities, interests, and readiness (Tomlinson, 1999).

As Tomilson (2010) states: In a differentiated classroom, teachers proactively plan and implement approaches that vary in content, process, and product by anticipating and responding to differences. Student differences in readiness, interests, and learning needs. This includes expectations and responsibilities for all students, multicultural diversity, recognition of different learning styles, and diverse intelligences (Gregory & Chapman, 2002).

"Visual impairment, including blindness," means a visual impairment that, even when corrected, negatively affects a child's educational performance. This term includes both partial vision and blindness. This deficiency refers to an abnormality in the eye, optic nerve, or visual center of the brain that results in decreased vision.

Visual impairments refer to a broad range of conditions that can affect a person's vision, often resulting in a decreased ability to see. Visual impairments can vary widely in terms of severity and the impact they have on an individual's daily life. WHO defines it as a person with low vision one who has impairment of visual functioning even after treatment and/or standard refractive correction, and has visual acuity (VA) of less than 6/18 to light perception, or a visual field of less than 10 degrees from the point of fixation, but who uses, or is potentially able to use, vision for the planning and/or execution of a task (Naipal & Rampersad, 2018). Some common causes of

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visual impairments are refractive errors (conditions such as nearsightedness (myopia), farsightedness (hyperopia), and astigmatism can cause blurred vision and may require corrective lenses to improve visual acuity), age-related macular degeneration (this condition, often associated with aging, affects the central part of the retina (macula) and can lead to a loss of central vision), cataracts (cataracts cause clouding of the eye's lens), leading to blurry or dim vision. They are often associated with aging but can also be present from birth or develop as a result of injury or disease), glaucoma (glaucoma is a group of eye conditions that can cause damage to the optic nerve, leading to vision loss and blindness if left untreated), diabetic retinopathy (people with diabetes may develop this condition, which affects blood vessels in the retina and can lead to vision impairment), retinitis pigmentosa (this is a group of genetic disorders that cause a gradual loss of peripheral vision and, in some cases, night blindness) and congenital disorders (some individuals are born with visual impairments due to genetic conditions), developmental abnormalities, or prenatal exposure to harmful substances (Lowenfeld, 1948).

Visual impairments can range from mild to severe, and individuals with visual impairments may have different levels of functional vision. Some people with visual impairments may be classified as legally blind, meaning that their visual acuity is severely limited, while others may have low vision, which refers to a significant visual impairment that cannot be fully corrected with glasses, contact lenses, or medical treatment. It is important to note that people with visual impairments have diverse needs and abilities, and many can lead independent and fulfilling lives with the appropriate support, accommodations, and access to resources. In educational settings, it's essential to provide inclusive and accessible learning environments for students with visual impairments, including the implementation of specialized instructional strategies and assistive technologies to support their learning.

From the inclusive perspective, visual impairments secure their human and child rights in case they acquire the education process or not? It hits me to explore the reality of curriculum-differentiated practice in Nepal in the case of VI.

Statement of the problem

Curriculum differentiation practice can provide justice for differently abled children i.e. visual impairments. From the inclusive perspective, it is important to practice the differentiated curriculum in the context of Nepal. Research shows that there is no more research conducted in the case of curriculum differentiation in Nepal. How is the practice of curriculum differentiation in case of visual impairments? Does the having practice ensure inclusion from the justice perspective? I want to explore the practice and effectiveness of curriculum differentiation in case of visual impairments.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are as:

• To explore the practice of curriculum differentiation in the case of content, strategy, environment, and assessment system

• To find the problems of curriculum differentiation practice

Research questions

- How is the curriculum differentiation practice providing justice for differently abled children?
- What are the problems of curriculum differentiation in case of visual impairments?
- How can such problems be reduced and establish justice for children?

Theoretical framework

Curriculum differentiation is a pedagogical approach that aims to tailor instruction to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Several educational theories and frameworks underpin the concept of curriculum differentiation. Some of the key theories and approaches related to curriculum differentiation include multiple intelligences theory (Howard Gardner): Gardner's theory posits that intelligence is not a singular entity, but rather a collection of multiple intelligences, including linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic intelligences (Morgan, 2021). Curriculum differentiation can be informed by this theory by recognizing and accommodating the diverse strengths and learning styles of students.

Similarly, another theory related to this study is sociocultural theory. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of scaffolding learning experiences within a student's zone of proximal development (ZPD), the range of tasks that a learner can perform with the help of more knowledgeable others. Differentiated instruction can be designed to provide appropriate levels of challenge and support to students within their ZPD (Turuk, 2008). Another related theory of this research is the constructivist learning theory. The constructivist approach posits that learners actively construct their understanding and knowledge through experiences and interactions. A differentiated curriculum can be designed to provide students with opportunities for inquiry-based learning, problem-solving, and authentic experiences that align with constructivist principles (Harasim, 2018).

These theories and frameworks provide a foundation for understanding the diverse needs of learners and designing curriculum differentiation strategies that address those needs. By incorporating these theories into curriculum planning and instructional practices, educators can create more inclusive and effective learning environments for all students.

Methodology

Research methods refer to the specific procedures or techniques used to identify, select, process, and analyze information about a topic. In a research paper, the methodology section allows readers to critically evaluate the overall validity and reliability of a study.

Research design

The research design refers to the overall strategy in which I choose to integrate the different components of this research coherently and logically, ensuring that I will solve the research problem effectively; it forms a model for collecting, measuring, and analyzing data. In this regard, I have used a case study approach through qualitative design. A case study is a research method to better understand a topic or process. Case studies involve in-depth research on a certain topic to understand its functionality and success.

Population and sampling procedure

In this study, I have selected a principal, two subject teachers of grade 10, and ten students of such grade which is the population of the study. Similarly, I have used a purposive sampling technique to select the principal and subject teachers and use a random sampling technique to select the students.

Information generation tools

In this research work, I have used non-participant observation and interviews to generate the information. I have used non-participant observation for the classroom activities in which the content, strategy, and learning environment can be differentially practiced differently. Similarly, I have used interviews with the principal and subject teachers to generate the information concerning the research questions.

Discussion and analysis

In this portion, I have discussed some tasks thematically. I have prepared some thematic topics and analysis of the information in this way:

The practice of curriculum differentiation in Nepal

One way to make a difference is to provide more learning time to specific groups of learners. However, as Houtveen, van de Grift, and Creemers (2004) point out, it is not simply giving more time but extra teaching that helps weaker students improve. This additional instruction may be organized through classroom groups for specific subjects (Ritzema et al., 2016). In the context of Nepal, the practice of curriculum differentiation for students with visual impairments, or blind students, is an important aspect of inclusive education. The government of Nepal has made efforts to address the educational needs of students with disabilities through policies and initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive education. Here are some practices related to curriculum differentiation for visual impairments in the context of Nepal:

Braille and accessible materials: Curriculum differentiation for blind students in Nepal involves providing accessible learning materials such as braille textbooks, tactile diagrams, and other adapted resources. Teachers and support staff are trained to transcribe regular textbooks into braille and create tactile materials to ensure that blind students have access to the same curriculum content as their sighted peers. In

the selected school of this study, there is a rich practice of braille script to deliver the content. One of the interviewees of this research (Grade teacher-10) argued that:

We have enough practice of braille script to deliver the content. Students are conditioned to learn the knowledge and skills from the recommended textbook by the government. Similarly, we are trained in such scripts and create tactile materials so students are free to learn from this script and the materials. Though the script is different the content is similar to the normal community school.

This argument explores the situation of the content delivery process in the school. Visual impairments make it easy to feel that the content is similar to the other normal community schools but the techniques are different which the teacher and students use. Similarly, they are unable to see clearly from the eye but they can easily find the nature of subject matter and knowledge by their brain. They have extra support from the teacher as more knowledgeable others (MKO). With the support of their teacher, they can increase their zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Assistive technology: The use of assistive technology, such as screen readers, refreshable Braille displays, and accessible digital resources, is integrated into the curriculum differentiation practices for blind students. These technologies help students access digital content, participate in online learning, and engage with educational materials in a way that meets their specific needs. This is another practice in the selected school. In this regard, one of the interviewees of this research (Principal) argued that:

In recent years we have lot of practice in digital technology. Most of the teachers are trained in the information technology. They have used assistive technology in the classroom. Students have entertained in their subject matter with the IT. It helps in their high achievement.

This statement supports knowing the achievement level of students in the present rather than the past. Similarly, teachers have their training in IT which is more supportive practice to the visual impairments. Likewise, the learning environment and the knowledge construction process are better with the help of IT. Students construct their knowledge with the help of their entire environment rather than the external environment.

Individualized education plans (IEPs): In line with inclusive education practices, schools in Nepal develop Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students with visual impairments. These plans outline specific learning goals, accommodations, and instructional strategies tailored to the individual needs of each blind student. IEPs are developed collaboratively with input from teachers, parents, and specialists. This type of practice is done in the selected school. I have generated the information through non-participant observation. In this regard, there was a practice of individualized education plans in the classroom. This practice supports students in their knowledge-constructing process. This practice is related to the content, strategy, learning environment, and evaluation system differentiation of the curriculum. Student's ZPD is increasing through

this practice on one side and they have used their inner power to construct the knowledge on the other. Multiple intelligence theory is also emphasized in the individualized education plans which support the learner's innate power and intelligence.

Specialized teacher training: Teachers and educators receive specialized training in inclusive education and strategies for curriculum differentiation to support blind students. This training equips teachers with the knowledge and skills to adapt teaching methods, provide multi-sensory learning experiences, and create a supportive learning environment for students with visual impairments. In this regard, one of the interviewees of this research argued that:

I have been working in this school for nine years. I have taken more training regarding special education for visual impairments. In recent times, I have been much more satisfied delivering content for visual impairments. Similarly, the instructional technique, environment, and evaluation system are much improved than in the past. It shows the increasing achievement level of students in the present than in the past. Different types of visual impairments have been learned through trained teachers these days. It supports drawing their innate power and developing their knowledge and skills.

This argument explores the supportive role of trained teachers. Students have been able to increase their ZPD and construct contextual knowledge. Similarly, the learning environment and the strategic differentiation are also helpful in learning the knowledge and skills for visual impairments.

Peer support and inclusive practices: Inclusive practices, such as peer support and collaborative learning, are encouraged to create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment for blind students. Inclusive education includes the understanding that all children have the right to a quality education, regardless of gender, disability, learning difficulty, ethnic or linguistic origin, or any other personal characteristics. In inclusive education, children with disabilities learn with peers of the same age as those in mainstream education (ADB, 2022). The focus is on helping all children, including children with disabilities, succeed academically through inclusive education. Similarly, peer support programs, buddy systems, and cooperative learning activities help blind or visually impaired students engage with their peers, build social connections, and participate in group activities. Socio-cultural theory argues that the social connection and participation of students in group activities make them aware of the group, and society and construct contextual knowledge.

Sensitization and awareness: Efforts are made to promote sensitization and awareness among school staff, students, and the broader community about the needs of blind students. This includes raising awareness about inclusive education, dispelling myths and misconceptions about visual impairments, and fostering a culture of acceptance and support for students with disabilities. Socio-cultural theory argues in the group awareness and activities of the people. visual impairments have felt sensitization and

they are aware to learn the knowledge.

These practices reflect Nepal's commitment to inclusive education and the implementation of curriculum differentiation to meet the unique learning needs of blind students. By integrating these strategies into educational settings, Nepal aims to provide equitable access to quality education for all learners, including those with visual impairments. In the case of international practice, there are diverse types of differentiation. In the Nepalese situation, the flexible model including content, strategy, environment and the evaluation system within the same class is better. Through information and technology (IT) it can be modified contextually. The evidence of international practice shows that there is no single model of differentiation is perfect i.e. the Finnish education system is known for its emphasis on equity and individualized learning. Teachers are trained to differentiate instruction based on student needs and interests, and students are encouraged to pursue their own learning goals. Similarly, United States: In US, curriculum differentiation is often implemented through the use of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students with special needs. IEPs outline specific goals, accommodations, and modifications for each student, based on their unique needs.

Problems of curriculum differentiation

There are some problems in the case of curriculum differentiation practice in the context of Nepal. Some general problems that can arise with curriculum differentiation practices include:

Lack of resources: Curriculum differentiation requires additional resources such as time, personnel, and materials. In the selected school, where resources are often limited, this can be a significant challenge. There are limited resources and materials to do the activities regarding the knowledge construction process. Students have enough braille script but there is a lack of additional resources. One of the interviewees of this research argued that:

We have no additional resources i.e. time, personnel, and materials. We have enough textbooks of braille script. Though the books are enough for students, the present contextual knowledge construction process is narrow because of limited resources. So, for its increase, there should be enough resources and materials. Some of them are from the government and some of them should be local agencies.

This argument explores the lack of resources in the learning activities of visual impairments. Not only the textbook in the braille script are resources but also there are other materials i.e. personnel and additional books. ZPD of a learner can increased through the additional materials which is not enough in the selected school.

Limited teacher training: Teachers need to be trained in curriculum differentiation practices to effectively implement them in the classroom. However, in the selected school, there are limited opportunities for teacher training, which can hinder the implementation of differentiated instruction. Most of the teachers have trained in this

school but the training is an ongoing process. So, limited teacher training is also a problem in the process of curriculum differentiation. One of the interviewees of this research (A grade teacher-10) argued that:

I am also a trained teacher regarding the braille script but it is not enough for me because some new techniques and strategies may arise in the present situation. I am practicing the traditional techniques to deliver the content. I am unable to use IT perfectly. So, I feel I have poor training. So it must be updated and increased for effective classroom instruction.

This argument explores the present situation of teacher training in the context of visual impairments and their learning process. Training is an ongoing process so it should be conducted regularly which supports the teachers in their instructional activities and the learning process of the visual impairments. Updated training can support to increase in the level of ZPD.

Cultural and linguistic diversity: Nepal is a diverse country with many different ethnic and linguistic groups. This can make it challenging to develop curricula that are inclusive of all students' needs and backgrounds. Regarding visual impairments cultural and linguistic diversity creates learning difficulties which affect the curriculum differentiation process. One of the participants of this research argued that:

I am reading in grade ten. I am from the Newari community. We have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the same class. Though I know Nepalese and English language in this class I feel too at ease to speak in my language. It means linguistic and cultural diversity hinder our learning process. Similarly, our teachers are from diverse backgrounds and we have mixed cultures inside the school which makes it quite difficult in our learning process.

This argument explores the problem of cultural and linguistic diversity in the learning process. curriculum differentiation process is quite difficult in the case of the content delivery process and the learning environment. The strategic process is also affected by the linguistic and cultural diversity. Socio-cultural theory argues the diverse background of students affects their learning process. This is sometimes affected in the inclusion process of visual impairments.

Standardized testing: In the selected school, standardized testing is often used to evaluate student performance and teacher effectiveness. However, this can create pressure to teach to the test and may discourage teachers from implementing differentiated instruction. In the process of curricular differentiation, in the case of the assessment system, one of the interviewees argued that:

We have just extra time and a braille script to express the response of students in the final examination. In the formative evaluation process, teachers can manage their record file (portfolio) but in the summative evaluation process, students have faced many problems because of expressing their responses through the helping person. Some of the visual impairments have been used in braille script but the blind students can use

another writing support person. This is the policy of the government in which a blind or visually impaired student can take support from a writing support person but that must be from the lower class i.e. an examiner is from grade 10, and the writing supporter must be grade 8. This is quite a difficult process to select the writing supportive person and work with him/her.

This argument explores the policy of the government towards the visual impairments and the blind. Similarly, the formative and summative examination systems are not standardized in the case of the evaluation process in this school. The classical practice or the paper-pencil test for visual impairments may hinder their evaluation process which is a defect of inclusion in the education system and the curriculum differentiation process.

Measures to reduce the problems of curriculum differentiation

Several measures can be taken to reduce the problems of curriculum differentiation practice in the context of Nepal. Some of the problems-reducing measures are as follows:

Teacher training: Provide comprehensive training programs for teachers to equip them with the knowledge and skills to implement curriculum differentiation effectively. This training should focus on understanding diverse student needs, designing inclusive curricula, and adapting teaching methods to cater to different learning styles. In this regard, one of the interviewees argued that:

We have training in a few manners. We are not updated on the instructional technology and the strategy as well. Though the poor training supports us a little bit, it is not enough. So we must have enough proper teacher training which makes us contextually updated and the curricular differentiated practice is better in terms of the visual impairments. (Grade teacher-10)

This argument argues that teacher training is essential in the changing context for the proper curriculum-differentiated practice. Secondly, there should be regular teacher training for the teachers to implement the contextually changed curricula. In the case of visual impairments, regular teacher training is a more essential part that supports the teacher in addressing the diversity of students in the content delivery process, strategy, learning environment, and assessment system.

Resource allocation: Allocate adequate resources such as teaching materials, technology, and support staff to facilitate curriculum differentiation in schools. This may involve government investment in education and partnerships with international governmental organizations (NGOs), and other organizations to provide necessary resources. In the selected school of this research, there are enough resources in terms of curriculum differentiation with the diverse students but new resources and materials are unavailable. The changing context needs and interests of students, the effect of IT, and the curricula need modified and updated resources. These should be allocated from

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the governmental level and the local level as well. Similarly, the school itself strongly managed the resources to implement the curriculum in case of visual impairments.

Inclusive curriculum development: Develop a curriculum that reflects the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students in Nepal. This should involve input from various stakeholders, including educators, community leaders, and parents, to ensure that the curriculum is inclusive and relevant to all students. Regarding to this one of the interviewees argued that:

At the policy level, there should be developed inclusive curriculum that makes differentiated practice better. Similarly, the involvement of stakeholders is also essential to make curricula inclusive. (The Principal)

This argument supports making curricula inclusive from the policy level. Socio-cultural diversity can be reflected at the policy level if there is participation of real stakeholders in the context of Nepal. If the curriculum is inclusive, it supports the differentiated process of the curricula. Parental and teacher participation in the process of curriculum development helps the curricular differentiated practice and it makes the strategic and assessment process fruitful.

Assessment reform: Review the assessment system to ensure that it aligns with differentiated instruction and does not solely focus on standardized testing. Implement alternative forms of assessment that can capture the diverse learning outcomes of students. In this regard, one of the interviewees of this research argued that:

We have a traditional assessment system in the school in case of visual impairments. The assessment system should be reformed from the policy level and it will be proper for the diverse students. Additional time and writing support are not the alternative ways to evaluate the student's achievement. So, it should be technology-friendly and contextual with standardization.

This argument supports the traditional assessment system of the school in case of the diverse students. If there is real practice of curriculum differentiation in the school, it increases the achievement level of students. For its practicality, the assessment system should be reformed from policy to practice. The knowledge construction process is relative. So, it also affects the process of assessment in the case of visual impairments. Therefore, the modified evaluation system should be implemented in the better practice of curriculum differentiation.

Conclusion

Curriculum differentiation practice is an emerging task in the context of Nepal regarding the diverse students in the case of inclusive education. There are some traditional practices to implement the curricula in case of visual impairment i.e. additional time, providing knowledge within the normal students, rarely using the braille script, etc. IT technology and the changing context require new practices to implement the curricula in diverse contexts. Poor resources, lack of proper training, lack

of standardized evaluation system, and lack of culturally responsive curricula are some of the problems in the present context of curriculum differentiation practice. To make better practice in the differentiated curricula, teacher training should be regular and updated, and contextual resources should be allocated, for the policy-wise reformation, the stakeholders should participate and the assessment system should be reformed. Proper practice of differentiated curricula supports the diversity of students regarding visual impairments and makes the educative process inclusive.

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