

Challenges for Preschool Teachers in Nepal Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract: This study investigates the ingenuity of Pre-School teachers in Nepal while handling students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Despite strong national policy regarding special educational needs and inclusion, lack of teachers training, societal stigma and policy implementation lags hinder inclusive classroom environment. The research uncovered how teachers used their hands-on-experience to deal with children with autism and help them. This reliance on self-derived knowledge comes at a personal cost of exhaustion and strongly highlights systemic neglect. This study concludes that empowering pre-school teachers in Nepal requires concrete policy actions rather than relying on teacher's individual ingenuity. Mandating teachers training programs, funds allocation for teaching resources, parents-teacher participation campaigns and developing monitoring and evaluation frameworks would significantly support teachers in their roles.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Inclusive education, Teachers challenges, Coping strategies, Resource limitations

1. Introduction

The constitution of Nepal establishes inclusive education as fundamental right and commits on providing equal opportunities for all children. The ground reality is far from commitment and a huge gap exist between policy formulation and implementation and that too especially for students with special needs. The societal stigma, lack of teacher training, inadequate infrastructure and poor policy implementation are some of the challenges affecting education for children with special needs in Nepal (Bajracharya and Siska, 2020). The scenario is much worse in rural part of the country where students are devoid of school and teachers.

(Acharya, 2024) in his study mentioned that 250,000 to 300,000 individuals live in Nepal with Autism

with 60,000 to 90,000 with severe symptoms. There is no actual figure with the government about the number of children diagnosed with ASD. This makes it even harder to estimate the number of children missing out in early childhood education. The lack of awareness, social superstition and lack of acceptance has tremendous effect on supporting children with ASD. (Heys et al., 2018) observed that only parents, doctors and disability professionals were able to recognize autistic behaviour and accepted the child has autism, others including teachers and community workers misattributed the autistic traits as 'stubborn'.

Problem Statement

The concept and understanding of ASD remain fairly low. A lack of awareness among educators, policy makers and the general public about ASD has put



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children with special needs at dire situation. The social superstition or social stigma has led to a belief that ASD is an illness and would subside with time, rather than a developmental condition of the child (Shrestha, 2019). Special Education Policy implemented in 2017 officially recognized ASD as a distinct disability and the government did announce some form of support but poor implementation of the policy has left many educators unprepared. Integrating children with ASD into early education is a key milestone towards equitable education (Yasar & Cronin, 2014). The educators of Nepal have very limited knowledge, awareness, understanding, attitudes, placement services, and teaching readiness towards ASD (Shrestha, 2019). The situation is much worse in early childhood education where educators are not highly qualified. This study examines the challenges faced by the pre-school teachers in Nepal teaching the children with Autism in the class room environment.

Research Objectives and Questions

This article aims to understand the challenges faced by the pre-school teachers in Nepal who teach children with ASD without prior trainings or knowledge about autism. The study also seeks to identify the strategies devised by the teachers to overcoming the challenges they faced.

2. Literature Review

There are public funded and private schools in Nepal that deliver education to the general public. Private institutions are mostly focussed on urban area of the country and charge some cost for the services delivered. Teachers in the public schools are hired by the government who may or may not have prior trainings in handling students with special needs. Teachers in most private schools have Montessori-method trainings but still lack formal preparation for supporting children with special needs (Shrestha, 2023).

School Education Sector Plan devised in 2018 implemented inclusive education for all children in Nepal. The teachers working in preschool are unprepared to handle student with autism because of the class sizes, limited or no relevant trainings, and societal stigma (Acharya, 2024). Because of these gaps, teachers deployed informal strategies such as learning from each other, understanding the children's need and giving them more time to support student with special

needs (Dawadi & Bissaker, 2020)

Integration of all children regardless of their ability into mainstream education is the prime focus of inclusive education (Smith et al., 2005, as cited in Dawadi & Bissaker, 2020). The lack of ASD awareness and diagnostic delays make enrolling the children with autism into pre-school very difficult (Acharya, 2024). Further, teachers in early education are ill-trained, they lack administrative support and there are shortages of resources (Dawadi & Bissaker, 2020). In Nepal most of the programs supporting these teachers are underfunded and lack infrastructure or other support (Shrestha, 2023). Different research has indicated that teacher's positive attitudes are very important to encourage better teaching strategies and handling students (Galaterou, 2017).

There is a clear gap that no one seems to focus on while implementing inclusive education in Nepal. The main resource, teachers, are not motivated and supported enough either financially or mentally to handle these children. Many research has indicated that the lack of practical skills in developing individual education plans and handling diverse group of students are necessary for teachers handling students with autism (Bruns & Mogharberran, 2009). Most of the teachers rely on their hands-on-experience or self-derived knowledge while dealing with autistic children (Crane-Mitchel & Hedge, 2007). Most teacher have some concept about autism but really lack the knowledge to apply it and this leads them to exhaustion (Sadler, 2005). (Hundert, 2007) mentioned that effective teacher development would provide practical and easy to implement strategies that can be integrated into daily routines.

3. Methodology

This study tries to understand the challenges faced by the pre-school teachers in Nepal who support children with Autism. Semi-structured interview method is used for the research purposes and tries to cover the voices and lived experiences of the pre-school teachers. The study offers an insight into the challenges and struggles of the teachers in low-resource setting like Nepal.

Research Design

A set of questionnaires were designed to conduct interview with the pre-school teacher who had experience of handling student with ASD for more than

a year. Ten female teachers from various private pre-school inside Kathmandu were interviewed for this research. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The questions were:

1. What were the most significant challenges you faced in your classroom.

2. What strategies were implemented to manage the challenges?

3. What teaching method did you find most effective for your classroom?

4. What changes did you make to your teaching approach to meet the needs of the student?

5. Please share a specific experience or challenge (if any) you faced while handling student?

6. What would help you to be more effective in your role ?

4. Results and Discussion

The semi-structured interview method was selected for data collection as this method encourages participants to freely express their experience (Mutch, 2005). This method suits our study to understand the challenges and the strategies used by the pre-school teachers in Nepal while handling students with ASD.

First, teachers pointed that the significant challenges they face is to keep the child at one spot for a certain duration. Most of the children were hyperactive and struggled sitting in their place. The trigger factor that made children behave in certain ways were mystery for most teachers in the initial days of their work. Because of the class size, it was a big struggle for the teacher to care for children with autism. The behaviour issues were something the teachers had never experienced before and making them socialize with their colleagues was equally challenging. Every child is different and their nature were different this made teachers question their approach with each child. They would recall this technique worked with one but the same would not work with the other autistic child and this had them lost and exhausted. Since the children in the preschool are very young understanding their learning needs was hard, the lack in socialization made it not easy for the teachers.

The teachers employed different innovative techniques to handle the children. They started using calming techniques for the hyperactive children, breathing method really helped them. They learned

about the child and their trigger factor and started avoiding the trigger points that would change their behaviours. The teachers started pre-informing about the activities they would do throughout the day so the children were prepared for what's ahead and were prepared for activities. The teachers would employ short breaks to the children to make them feel less exhausted. The use of picture cards, flash cards and story books were effective in handling them. The most effective method was communicating with parents if they had shown any behaviour in the morning or how the child was feeling. This really helped teacher understand their student's behavior and effectively support them.

Based on their experience the teachers devised different instructional methods to make the class more inclusive. The teachers would give more time and attention to the child with autism to help grasp what was happening or what they were teaching. The teachers would ask other students to help their friend with autism in doing classroom chores. The needs-based approach was used to help them study materials, use of flash cards, story books and visual aids were found to be very effective. Giving the children time to settle into their class room environment and understanding their needs really helped the teachers.

One of the teachers has a really bad experience when the student started banging their head and self-harming, she panicked and called their parents for help. The teacher really struggled with the behaviour and it took her sometime to get over things.

Almost all the teachers mentioned they did not have enough knowledge and training for supporting children with special needs especially autism. The teachers mostly relied on their own to learn about autism. The lack of teaching resources and learning materials made the teachers struggle with their teaching. In some cases, parental support was also missing. The lack of understanding about autism among the parents and their inability to accept that their child is autistic made things worse for the teachers. Teachers realised that the parents support, availability of learning materials and trainings would motivate and support in their teaching journey.

5. Conclusion

Without formal training, teaching resources, or any

systematic support, Nepali pre-school teachers face significant challenges handling children with autism spectrum disorder. Teachers face difficulties in managing hyperactivity, identifying behavioural issues and understanding the needs of the students. Societal stigma, parental denial and poorly implemented policies make things worse for these teachers to promote inclusive education. Parents-teacher participation campaigns would significantly support and encourage teachers in their roles.

Despite the barriers, teachers showed remarkable ingenuity in developing their own strategies. The implementation and use of calming techniques, picture cards (visual aids), and improved parent communication helped promote inclusive environment. These self-developed techniques often lead to inconsistent results and lead to additional work pressure to the teachers.

The study revealed that there is an urgent need to rethink Nepal's inclusive education policies that would address the classroom realities. Increased funding for resources, decreasing the class room sizes, training the educators and massive public awareness campaigns are deemed necessary. Empowering teachers and providing them with resources are important to integrate children with autism into classroom environment. Future research should be conducted to assess the long-term impact of these interventions and explore the challenges in rural areas.

6. Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this study. The study was carried out using the semi-structured interview method with only ten teachers who had handled students with autism in their classroom. Data was gathered in a short duration of interview and the limited participation of teacher limited the responses.

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