



Exploring Teachers' Experience in Diversity Management at Community Schools of Nepal: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the perceptions and practices of diversity management among community school teachers in Nepal, characterized by religious, cultural, linguistic, gender, and socioeconomic differences. The research examines how teachers understand, implement, and navigate classroom diversity. Applying interpretative phenomenology to seven community schools from each province of Nepal, the researchers purposively selected one school and two teachers from each school. Representation of experience, ethnicity, culture, and gender was ensured in the sample selection process. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The codes were organized to create the main themes. The main themes were interpreted and discussed by linking them to theories and the reviewed literature. The findings revealed that instructional practices were influenced by limited institutional support, inadequate training, and existing social and cultural norms. Despite the challenges, the teachers demonstrated adaptive strategies, such as contextualized teaching pedagogy and community engagement, to foster an inclusive learning environment. The study asks for policy attention to teachers' professional development in the areas of diversity management and inclusive pedagogy to foster equity in community schools. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive education by focusing on a ground-level perspective that informs meaningful educational reform in a developing country like Nepal.

Keywords: Culturally responsive pedagogy, diversity management, inclusive education, interpretative phenomenology

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Introduction

Nepal is a country of diversity, with numerous dimensions encompassing ideology, caste, race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, and topographical features. There are 142 castes and 125 languages spoken across the country (National Statistics Office 2021). The community's diversity is profoundly reflected in the classroom and poses a challenge for managing it to achieve the expected educational goal (Sherpa, 2020). Community school teachers are struggling with severe challenges in educating children with diverse needs. Existing inclusive and multilingual education practices influence current legislative provisions regarding diversity perspectives. Teachers with a pedagogical mindset in the classroom seem to be effective in enhancing students' academic performance (Yu et al., 2022).

Implicit biases are well-documented phenomena in global society, but little research has examined how they matter, even unconsciously, between teacher and student, particularly in classroom management. Managing diversity in the classroom is a challenging task that requires teachers to develop meaningful strategies. Creating an inclusive environment provides a supportive atmosphere (Irshad et al., 2024). Since the student comes from a very diverse background, including cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and intellectual factors that influence their learning, communication styles, and prior knowledge, these factors may create barriers to participation, collaboration, and access to educational resources (Sherpa, 2020). The teacher needs to address the problems caused by classroom diversity while fostering respect and ensuring inclusiveness to improve learning outcomes. The government of Nepal has achieved an unexpected educational goal across multiple

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domains from a development perspective. Educating as a powerful weapon for developing nations, the student's development is essential by equipping them. Government agencies are failing to train community schoolteachers to meet classroom needs. Classroom diversity is influenced by such scenarios that impede inclusion in education. This paper explores the teachers' hands-on experiences with practices and the challenges they face in adapting diversity management strategies in the Nepalese classroom to minimize the gap between policy and practice.

In Nepal, there are three tiers of government, from the federal to the local level (Acharya & Scott, 2022). The educational authority has been transferred to the local government, with full financial authority. The Ministry of Education in Nepal has been weakened due to budgetary constraints. In such a condition, the central government cannot impose on local governments for the implementation of the central education policy. Government stakeholders come from diverse political backgrounds and have little knowledge of Education (Paradeise, 2020). The School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032) has clearly mentioned the objectives as to ensure equity in education for inclusion, in terms of access, participation, and learning achievement, with the intention of mitigating disparities among diverse social groups. In the assertion of the National Curriculum Framework 2019, there is unsatisfactory access to education for children who belong to indigenous, marginalized, and disadvantaged. The evidence shows that the local government lacks a vision for educational development due to a variety of constraints like limited resources. Local government personnel are reluctant to address diversity issues in schools by restructuring the existing situation (Sherpa & Baraily, 2021). The diversity characteristic seeks a contextual and meaningful resolution to strengthen students' full potential; the authoritative agencies are observing a speechless audience that is less explored in the context of community schools in Nepal. Moreover, issues of ensuring inclusivity in community schools across diversity management have been less explored. Thus, this study seeks to explore the practices teachers experience in the classroom regarding diversity management and effective ways to manage diversity to achieve the expected goal of Education.

Research Question

How do teachers practice diversity management strategies in the classroom /school?

Underpinning the Literature as Addressing Diversity in the Classroom

The current classroom is diverse in terms of gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and different learning needs. The varying learning needs, differences in pacing, and background differences among students are crucial for classroom management. It focuses on differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and other strategies outlined in the personalized learning plan, all aimed at creating an inclusive environment. In addition,

this study emphasizes the need for culturally responsive teaching and social-emotional support. Technology-driven pedagogy and ongoing professional development are essential for effective diversity management (Irshad et al., 2024).

Teacher Preparedness in Diversity Management

Teacher preparedness refers to the knowledge and skills that equip teachers to manage diversity effectively. Well-prepared teachers can effectively manage the multicultural classroom to address diversity issues. A 2001 study conducted a qualitative research approach with eight novice teachers working in urban elementary school settings. The study urged that cultural pedagogy, culture, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness are essential qualities of teachers (Kaldi et al., 2018). The research also found that prospective teachers working in diverse communities need competency in learning about students in their social context and in training with skilled cooperating teachers. Delpit also supported this research and highlighted that a teacher with inadequate skills is unable to address diversity issues, including cultural ones. Racial, ethnic, and economic differences so they need to be equipped to address students' diverse backgrounds (Clark & Andreasen, 2021). Diversity is a challenge larger than a barrier, and the effective use of differentiated instruction is a diversity management strategy.

Culture Responsive Pedagogy

The use of diverse students' cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives as a major principle for teaching and learning is known as culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002). It is generally assumed that when academic knowledge and skills are embedded in students' cultural experiences and references, they are likely to be more meaningful and beneficial throughout the study. This is culturally relevant pedagogy, offering hope and guidance to teachers seeking to improve students' academic achievement from diverse ethnic and low-income backgrounds. Some effective strategies for managing diversity in class include differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and an inclusive curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives (Clark & Andreasen, 2021). Educators must also address potential biases and create an environment where all students feel valued and understood. By reflecting on these challenges and implementing strategic approaches, teachers can better manage classroom diversity to ensure each student's success.

Theoretical Framework

To discuss findings from the ground information, this study employed social cognitive theory and schema theory. The main constructs of these theories are listed below.

Social Cognitive Theory

This theory examines how diversity can lead to negative

outcomes within the organization. According to this theory's construct, people use classification to simplify problems and cope with large amounts of information (Rizzello & Turvani, 2002). Classification supports dividing data and people by visible characteristics such as age, sex, race, and learning ability (Lutz, 2015). When students are identified with specific diversity features, those attributes are automatically activated to support their better achievement. In the case of invisible categorization, a person's name cannot reveal their race or identity. Stereotypes are correlated with the categorization and overgeneralization of features about the groups. Since stereotypes are the foundation of prejudice and discrimination. In classroom discourse, when categorization occurs, the teacher's decision-making is affected, which is inconsistent with valuing diversity that supports observing how social understanding guides practices of inclusivity in the classroom.

Schema Theory

This theory explains how individuals infer information about others from their demographic features. The information and knowledge individuals experience are stored as patterns and interrelationships, creating schemas that are used to evaluate oneself or others (Bandura, 2003). From the perceived knowledge and beliefs embodied in the schema, individuals categorize people, events, and objects. Based on schema theory, teachers develop schemas about students based on their race, gender, and other diversity traits. Similarly, Individual developed a schema for educational policies, leadership, and the learning environment that guide how individual differences create difficulties in diversity management.

Methods

This study employed an interpretative paradigm, which creates knowledge from the social setting (Vagle, 2018). Subjective and multiple realities are the ontological bases and a deep understanding of phenomena with profound interaction within a social setting, which deserve to be considered as an epistemological instance. The power relation between teacher and student in classroom discourse is valued for addressing the diversity issues in the classroom. Qualitative research, along with interpretive phenomenology, was applied to draw meaning from the social setting to answer the research question (Frechette et al., 2020). Seven community schools, one from each province, were purposively selected as research sites. Altogether, fourteen teachers from these schools, including two from each school, volunteered to participate in an in-depth interview. The participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview guidelines validated by expert judgment. The interview was conducted in a suitable location for the participant, allowing them to end at any time.

At the beginning, participants were presented with a detailed explanation of the study, including its objectives, methods, and measures to maintain confidentiality. Upon

agreement, participants signed a written informed consent form. The appropriate time was determined after school, and the interview was held within the school. The interview guidelines were prepared based on the study's objective, the theoretical foundation, and a review of the studies, in a semi-structured manner. Using the opinions and guidance of an expert in diversity management and inclusion, the validity was confirmed. A pilot interview was conducted to examine the types of questions to be asked, their order, and how to ask them, and a guide for implementing an in-depth interview was finalized. The preliminary interview guideline was first prepared and reviewed by experts familiar with the qualitative research method. Questions were asked in Nepali about the experience of managing diversity in the classroom and the barriers to managing diversity. In the continuation of the interview process, exploratory questions such as "Please explain more." What did you mean by the sentence you said? were used. The interviews continued until data saturation. All the interviews with the digital audio device were recorded. The interviews lasted 40-60 minutes, and at the end of the discussion, it was determined how to contact the participants for possible additional explanation.

In this study, thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The steps taken in this method include transcribing the entire interview immediately after each interview, reading the transcription to get a general understanding of its content, determining the meaning of units and basic codes, and organizing codes into more comprehensive themes.

Results and Discussions

This section presents a discussion of the findings drawn from the ground information shared by the participants, along with their narrative information. The discussions have been based on theories and relevant literature to align with the study's objectives. The main findings are presented as themes, and the subthemes are discussed below.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom

The Nepalese classroom is characterized by diversity in terms of caste, race, language, and culture, reflecting the diversity of Nepalese society. The learning outcomes of students with diverse needs are affected by this type of difference. Students from diverse backgrounds need multiple learning strategies that the teacher adopts to achieve the expected goal. The diversity issues need to be addressed to ensure effective student engagement in classroom discourse. In this context, participant T1 said:

I have been teaching at this school for the last 10 years. The students representing more than five communities are engaging in the classroom for their educational attainment. The interaction occurs within the same community, in their mother tongue, and they murmur to themselves when I start my class in the mainstream language. I feel uneasy about engaging them in the classroom activity.

In the above concern, the students were from diverse

backgrounds in the classroom for their studies and communicated with each other in their own mother tongues. Those students who speak their mother tongue cannot communicate well in Nepali, the language of the mainstream. The teacher instructs in Nepali, making it difficult to conceptualize the assigned reading in the curriculum. The Nepal Constitution 2015 clearly states that children have the right to receive basic education in their mother tongue. Despite this provision, the children are not educated accordingly due to the absence of multilingual teachers. Therefore, the government needs to focus on developing multilingual teachers to address language diversity. Students' academic achievement increases when they are taught in their mother tongue. Instruction in students' home language enables them to engage in classroom activities fully. Students with high linguistic diversity have fewer friends in the non-native group. As the study suggests, the social integration of students with diverse language backgrounds can be improved by reducing linguistic diversity and allowing more students with the same language to be placed in the same class (Bredtmann et al., 2021). In this concern, participant T2 stated:

I teach mathematics at the secondary level, and the students are willing to engage fully in their language group. I heard students speaking new words, but I cannot understand them or interact with them.

In the above assertion, the teacher who teaches in the class is unable to describe the mathematical content in Newari. The students in the classroom are native speakers of their native language who are unlikely to be engaged with the mainstream language the teacher uses. Students' understanding of their home language is more effective than in the mainstream language. In their native language, students can collaborate and learn abstract mathematical concepts (Liddicoat & Curnow, 2014). So, the teacher who teaches in a diverse classroom, in terms of language, needs at least bilingual skills. Another participant said,

I am a member of the Newari community and can easily interpret Newari content. In explaining the mathematical content, I clarify the concept in the mother tongue. Sometimes I conceptualize abstract reasoning through the Newari language. The student also interacts with me in Newari.

In the above concern, a teacher with a native background can easily elaborate on the content in Newari. By exaggerating mathematical concepts in the mother tongue, students can learn effective strategies and achieve better scores on their performance tests. The students can discuss openly in their own language. However, the examination system is in the mainstream language, and the knowledge acquisition process intersects with the individual's potential. Students in the classroom may have diverse language backgrounds, and they are unlikely to be equally engaged (Anyichie et al., 2023). Due to the translingual communication, each student is fully engaged in the classroom activity.

Differentiated Instruction in the Classroom

The instructional strategy is designed to create a flexible, comprehensive learning environment that enhances the effectiveness of diversity management strategies. The flexible teaching approach guides teachers in meeting learners' diverse needs from their natural perspectives. Different instructional styles can address students' varied needs simultaneously within the same planning (Landrum & McDuffie, 2010). In doing so, students are effectively involved in classroom activities to develop their potential. In this context, one of the participants, T2, said,

I teach students with diverse backgrounds using the same mainstream language. I deliver the instruction using only one strategy due to time constraints. Different learning styles cannot be leveraged due to the boundaries of formal education. Delivering content in more than one language is a more tedious and time-consuming process, which can make it difficult to meet the school calendar.

In relation to the above, the teachers' experience is that teaching through multiple languages takes more time and ultimately hampers the class. In multilingual instruction, the teacher needs to repeat the content frequently. In doing so, the Bonafede student may feel bored and leave the class. Teachers need to adopt teaching methods that accommodate all students with diverse needs, including those with disabilities and those with different linguistic backgrounds. The teacher needs to manage conflicts that arise in the classroom with varied interests. Some effective strategies for managing diversity in the classroom include differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and an inclusive curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives (Akintayo et al., 2024). The teacher needs to address the potential biases and create an environment where all students feel valued and understood. This study explores the challenges and the strategic approaches teachers can implement to manage classroom diversity better and ensure each student's success. In the context above, the participant highlighted,

Students with visual impairments are studying in my class. They use slate and a stylus as classroom learning materials. The general teachers, including me, do not have knowledge of Braille to teach students with visual impairments. When I teach arithmetic, they listen and copy in their slates, but when I start teaching algebra and geometry, they leave the classroom. The reason is that there is no provision for mathematical symbols on their slate.

In the above quotation, the general teacher does not possess specialized skills, such as Braille reading, for teaching students with visual impairments. For effective teaching, the teacher should have knowledge of differentiated instruction that accommodates all students in the classroom. Since the differentiated instruction is a teaching model that provides all students with different features to engage in, it creates a shared environment. This instructional strategy offers a welcoming environment for all learners in cultivating their

potential. So, the teacher needs to be given the facilities for training in differentiated instruction.

Addressing Implicit Bias

Their community and family backgrounds influence teachers' and students' attitudes and perceptions. The behavior they exhibit toward the varied nature of diversity depends on their personal reference (Vazquez-Montilla et al., 2014). The teacher who belongs to a conservative family background is reluctant to change the caste discrimination approach and tries to discriminate against mates accordingly. In this context, one of the participants, T3, said,

I teach social studies in class 9, where students belong to diverse caste groups. In most caste groups, their rituals and customs are similar. I exhibit uniform behavior across all students regarding teaching content and the delivery of reading materials. In lesson planning, there is no difference based on caste or ethnicity. The same content and strategies work for all learners without any differences.

In the above example, the teacher teaches social studies in a diverse classroom. Despite classroom diversity, the teacher is exhibiting uniformity in delivering content and pedagogy. The lesson-planning structure also emphasizes classroom diversity. The same content is further discussed before being presented in the class. The policy needs to be formulated and updated to advance diversity and inclusion within schools. The antibullying and zero-harassment policy must be promulgated and enforced on school premises (Gay, 2002). The school should maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with parents and community members to carry out collaborative tasks regarding diversity and inclusion. Another participant T4 said,

I belong to the Brahmin community, which has been rooted in classicism for many years. Under the 2015 Nepalese constitution, caste discrimination is strictly prohibited and punishable. I cannot discriminate in the class, but caste-based flavor comes to my mind at home due to my grandparents. Sometimes I request at home about legal provisions and the non-existence of caste and racism in the Veda, so caste-based discrimination is unscientific and meaningless.

The teacher is required to participate in a social awareness program organized by various advocacy organizations and to learn about the nation's anti-discrimination policy. Therefore, the teacher needs to create a safe and inclusive classroom environment with clear expectations that promote equal respect and encourage effective communication among peers. In such situations, the students are likely to feel engaged and motivated to learn. The teachers themselves need to be aligned in a research study to assess the effectiveness of diversity management strategies and identify what does and does not work. By focusing on teachers' experiences and perspectives, this research aims to inform effective diversity management strategies that ensure support for all students in an inclusive learning

environment (Assefa & Zenebe, 2024).

Increased Academic Achievement

Integrating cultural background into their reading content willingness, as expected, improves their learning performance. The student with a diverse background feels entertained and acknowledged for personal development (Anyichie et al., 2023). The teacher needs to create a more participatory learning environment to fulfill the diverse needs of learners. The teacher needs to have strong cultural competency and awareness that lead to personal development. In this context, participant T1 said:

When teaching social studies, the teacher needs to incorporate the various cultures of the student's community into classroom activities. I assigned the task of preparing a report on a cultural festival celebrated at a particular time, with a focus on its role modeling.

In this context, classroom diversity is one of the beautiful vignettes that enrich learners' potential. The learners maintain the dynamics of diverse knowledge by sharing their lived experiences. The student with diverse needs is most likely to feel engaged and motivated about learning. In the use of culturally responsive pedagogy, students deserve better learning outcomes during their academic tenure (Sherpa, 2020). The teacher can maintain stronger, more positive relationships with students from diverse backgrounds. The teacher who manages diversity can foster cultural competency and awareness, leading to personal growth and development. Making space to discuss curricular content creates a safe and respectful environment for students who feel biased and marginalized in the classroom. Definitely, they feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues like racism and social justice rooted in the community.

Incorporating Local Culture in Curriculum

The teacher can plan a lesson involving various types of texts and materials, drawing on students' experiences from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Cultural heritage not only reflects a community's identity but also fosters a sense of national pride (Gay, 2002). The local low-cost material, embracing different culture-based events and scripture, needs to be incorporated into the text and materials. In this context, participant T2 asserted:

The mainstream curriculum is designed to incorporate cultural content and is basically integrated with Western-dominated content. Most of the subject content deviates from multicultural content. The multicultural student is imposed upon by a monolingual curriculum that impedes better learning in his or her own natural environment.

The students in the classroom possess varied differences, including intelligence and learning styles. The students are representing different socio-cultural backgrounds. Each student belongs to their own culture. The cultural content of every student needs to be shared to transform society

(Sherpa & Baraily, 2021). Other cultural festivals such as *Losar*, *Dhan Nach*, *Rodi*, and *Sakela*. Incorporating numerous texts and materials, the teacher designs her lessons to involve a variety of texts or materials, for instance, using books that portray the experiences of students from various cultural backgrounds. In relation to the above, another participant said,

The mainstream curriculum is fully influenced by mainstream culture and values, which guide students to be value-laden. The school's curriculum and textbooks are unable to incorporate local culture and customs. The constitution legitimizes the provision for mother tongue instruction, but the practice is ineffective in implementation. In the lack of readiness, the efforts and initiatives are being defunct.

In this regard, the current school curriculum lacks content related to the traditional values and norms embedded in the community. By legislative provision, students have the right to be educated in their preferred mother tongue. But the students at the basic level have not accessed this type of opportunity, which impedes their educational performance. So, ineffective implementation of policy is becoming a barrier to diversity management, which is essential for ensuring inclusivity in the school. Since addressing diverse learners' needs is an indicator of quality education, each student should have the opportunity to develop their innate powers in line with their needs and interests through education. According to social cognitive theory, categorization cultivates social identity and seeks equal respect and dignity to develop a just society.

Celebrating Cultural Holidays and Customs

Diversity encompasses different castes and ethnicities, as well as various types of costumes and rituals. Based on ethnic background, people are considered to celebrate festivals and ceremonies (Sherpa, 2020). To foster mutual respect for diversity, holidays should be celebrated with joy. The cultural holidays have a complex sociological impact, contributing to community cohesion, the transmission of cultural values, and the consolidation of national identity and unity in Nepali society. In this context, participant T4 said,

In my class, students belong to different castes and ethnicities. They have separate cultural programs and festivals in their community. These days, the students seem to be absent from class. I repeat the content the next day when they come. The government has declared holidays for most of the cultural groups' festivals. In some cases, students may be able to retake the course due to absenteeism.

In this context, a teacher respects the holiday associated with a cultural group's festival. In some festivals of minority groups, the government has not provided holidays. In such a situation, if a student appears to be absent and is falling behind in classroom activities, they are allowed to learn in the next class through revision. Since diversity is a beautiful ornament of national identity, the school should offer local holidays to students in their community during school

functions. The school can adjust local leave for long-term vacation (Banks, 2008). The teacher's experience highlights the need for an inclusive, supportive learning platform for students from diverse backgrounds. In managing diversity across gender, disability, ethnic background, age, and linguistic background, the teacher needs to have competency in diversity management strategies as perceived in the ground reality. Another participant said,

Since culture is not just about festivals, it is our identity that connects us to our history and to students from different communities. As we know, school is like a miniature of society, where different cultures, rituals, languages, and traditions go together. Celebration indicates that diversity is not only separation but also something that helps us be stronger and more vibrant.

This quotation suggests that culture shapes social identity and connects people within human civilization. Being the school as a miniature of society, the students are bound by the threads of social relationships, which cannot be easily broken. The diversity in the classroom is accelerating together to ease organization and build greater momentum. The respect for diversity can energize individuals to come together and unleash their potential. Diversity management keeps people stronger and more vibrant for social development. Another teacher said,

In our school, we organize cultural programs on special occasions related to local customs and traditions. The presentations by the students include traditional dance, songs, drama, and cultural performances. The performances focus on story recitation, which represents the unique heritage of the local community, passed down from generation to generation.

In the above concern, celebrating cultural programs and festivals is an opportunity not only to entertain but also to learn and respect each other's cultural traditions. Since education is the tool for social transformation, students are active agents of social dynamism and initiators of the eradication of social evils. The school needs to create a favorable environment for social harmony and mutual respect to transform society. The function of education should align with the preservation of unique heritage to support national identity. So the educators need to keep the social tradition alive by embracing innovative ideas, mutual respect, and understanding.

Conclusion

An inclusive, supportive, and democratic learning environment for students is essential for diversity management in the classroom. The study's findings indicated that teachers' experience and perspective play a crucial role in developing an appropriate diversity management strategy. The teacher's attitude and assumptions can affect the ability to manage diversity. Culturally responsive pedagogy and a multilingual teaching strategy foster the incorporation of diverse texts and materials to create an inclusive learning environment. Culturally responsive

teaching practices, such as the use of diverse texts and materials, will create an inclusive learning environment that helps students become more engaged in school and improve their academic achievement.

Differentiated instruction can help the teacher address learners' diverse needs by adopting different teaching styles. Multiple teaching styles can help the teacher develop a deeper understanding of the learner's needs and interests. Differentiated instruction is a key factor in helping teachers meet the varied needs of children in a classroom, including those with disabilities. One of the chief factors that most strongly influences teachers' abilities to manage class diversity is their attitude and bias towards students' individual differences. To mitigate implicit biases, a teacher needs to be sensitized by providing opportunities to participate in awareness programs and social transformative actions organized through social activities. Culturally responsive teaching practices are essential in making a classroom inclusive. The teachers need continuous professional development to update their teaching skills in diversity management and to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills to foster an inclusive learning environment. Government agencies need to offer seminars, workshops, and training for teachers' professional development, focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy, diversity management, and differentiated instruction. The curriculum needs to be developed by integrating cultural content and incorporating the experiences of culturally specific people.

Educational Implication

The study contributes to fostering an inclusive learning environment through diversity management, where students feel that every learner has the opportunity to learn in a friendly classroom environment. Similarly, the study provides insights to frame an inclusive learning policy for the concerned policymakers.

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Authorship

The principal author contributed to shaping the study's concept and all other research activities, including designing the methodology, data collection, drafting, and final review of the manuscript, which were contributed to by both the principal and corresponding authors.

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