

TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES ON INCLUDING YOUNG CHILDREN
WITH AUTISM: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Sarita Khadka* for the degree of *Master of Philosophy in STEAM Education* presented on 16 July 2023, entitled *Teachers' Lived Experiences on Including Young Children with Autism: A Narrative Inquiry*.

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This dissertation comprises an inquiry of early childhood educators who are teachers of children with autism in regular preschools. I have explored the stories of teachers concerning how they have been educating one or more children with autism with other students who do not have autism in the same mixed and inclusive classroom. The study explored current teaching practices, perceptions on including children with autism in the regular classroom, and the challenges and coping strategies of teachers who have been following the early childhood education curriculum provided by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), Bhaktapur. The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of 5 teachers while educating children with autism spectrum disorder in regular classrooms, focusing on academic and behavioural aspect. A narrative inquiry method was used; in-depth interviews were arranged with the teachers, and classroom observations were undertaken at five different pre-schools in the Kathmandu Valley. All the interviews, my personal reflections, observations and field notes, and the teachers' reflections on how they created meaning from particular incidents and experiences, were recorded and transcribed. The data were coded, categorized, and thematised, and then analysed through various theoretical lenses - such as the theory of autism, the theory of inclusive special education, and social constructivism.

The research findings revealed that early childhood educators are following different pedagogical and multi-dimensional approaches to try to make classrooms more inclusive. The teachers' own ideas, opinions and concepts about education, their memorable moments, and how they perceive autism influences their inclusion and

teaching experiences. The findings demonstrate the current educational scenario of educating early grades inside the Kathmandu valley of Nepal. They also reveal the positive changes on the children's behaviour and learning when students study in the same mixed classroom whether they are autistic or not. However, the lack of awareness on autism amongst teaching and all school support staff, the emotional roller coaster experienced by the participant teachers, poor access to professional development, and parents negative and unsupportive attitudes are identified as key challenges to the promotion of inclusivity in the classroom.

Despite the dire need for both technical and emotional support, the teachers who participated in this study are currently, largely on their own, coping with the required extra pedagogic preparations, building a more positive in-school collaborative environment, applying student-centric pedagogical interventions, and attempting to maintain mental balance and well-being in the school and at home.

One of the main implications of the findings is the strong recommendation that all teachers and support staff require further professional development and mentoring on autism and inclusive education practices - this was suggested by all the teacher participants for the betterment of children with and without autism. The study compellingly identified that our current educational policy and practice needs more resourceful and skilful teachers when including children with autism in regular classrooms.

In conclusion, including young children with autism in inclusive classrooms revealed positive changes in terms of effective classroom management and results for both teaching and learning if practices followed a student centric classroom, if positive teachers' support was provided, if all stakeholders were engaged, if attitudes were gently and gradually changed, and if responsible advice on mental well-being was provided.

16 July 2023

Sarita Khadka
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This dissertation of *Sarita Khadka*, entitled *Teachers' Lived Experiences on Including Young Children With Autism: A Narrative Inquiry* presented on 16 July 2023.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree.

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16 July 2023

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents and the siblings Sangita, Sushil and
Sapana
And equally
To
Safal, my mentors, friends', family, and individuals who are working in the field of
inclusive education.

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Teachers' Lived Experience on Including Young Children with Autism in Regular Classrooms: A Narrative Inquiry explored the early childhood educators teaching journey on including children with autism in their regular classroom. I'm incredibly proud of this academic journey I engaged on while writing this dissertation, which allowed me to discover my full potential. I want to express my deepest gratitude to the countless scholars, friends, and well-wishers who supported and contributed to my academic endeavour, helping me bring it to a fruitful and meaningful conclusion.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CC	Central Coherence
CDC	Curriculum Development Centre
CWA	Child with Autism
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECED	Early Childhood Education Development
EF	Executive Function
IE	Inclusive Education
IEM	Inclusive Education Model
IEP	Individual Educational Plan
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SP	Sensory Processing
ToM	Theory of Mind

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CHAPTER I

SETTING THE SCENE: ELUCIDATION INTO MY REALITY

In this chapter, I have defined my research focus in relation to the experiences of teachers including young children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which exists across the world, in regular classroom. As the number of children with ASD enrolling in regular classrooms has increased significantly, understanding teachers' experiences in educating these children has become a crucial research agenda. This chapter presents my research journey, starting with the background of the study in which my position as a researcher and a problem statement are clarified. It further describes the techniques that I have used to formulate my research questions, and, additionally, it highlights the significance of the study.

Personal Vignette

Time teaches us many things and provides ample opportunities to experience and learn in the real world. One meaningful learning I received some years ago was when I received the opportunity to work with a unique child. He was mostly silent, never made eye contact with people, and had no friends. Let me narrate this in detail. A decade ago, I noticed a child in my kindergarten class, where I started my career as an early childhood teacher; I saw this boy flapping his arms, shouting, and throwing objects unnecessarily, with attendants around him trying to calm him down. He was in my class. So, from the first day, I noticed that he loved to play alone and gave no response towards his peers or teachers, including myself, and rarely participated in group activities. He used to make peculiar noises and had temper tantrums if he needed to go to the washroom. He used to bang the tables, flap his hands and run here and there without any reason. These activities worried me about the classroom disruptions due to his behaviour and the child's future. With deep concern in my mind, I consulted with the school counsellor with whom I was working and came to know that the child had some symptoms of autism, a term I was unaware of at that time. I read various articles and consulted with psychologists, doctors, educators, and special needs educators. Because of my limited theoretical and practical knowledge about autism, I could not engage that child in class activities or help him significantly in the socialization process, and everyday my classroom was disrupted by his behaviour. I realised that I couldn't control him or help him, so I decided to undertake training on

Autism. The training helped me a lot to understand autism and the ways to educate children with ASD. As time went by, a significant event occurred within my own family: my niece was diagnosed with autism. This incident prompted me to go deeper into the field of autism research, as I witnessed the numerous challenges faced by my family, my niece's teachers, and other staff members involved in her care. As a teacher, I believe that the caring and understanding of teachers regarding the needs of all children is crucial for successful learning, especially when it comes to children with special needs.

Similarly, understanding, caring and nurturing are the most prominent factors as they directly affect children's rate, route, and the ultimate level of learning achievement (Ali et al., 2019). I have witnessed that without students' desire to learn and a positive feeling towards the teacher they cannot learn properly. If students with ASD are nurtured properly, they have the potential to learn quickly and commendably (Sun & Du, 2023). I always tried to understand students in my class in kindergarten, and questions often passed through my mind - such as "How can I make my classroom manageable and more inclusive? How do I cope with students' behaviour issues? Is another child becoming distracted by one particular child?". During my training at Autism Care Nepal, I met teachers from various schools concerned with both inclusiveness and special-needs. Although the Nepali Constitution of 2015 emphasizes inclusive and special education, with a policy published in 2017 (Shiwakoti, 2022), we, as the primary stakeholders haven't received any training and orientation programs on special-needs education. The Nepal government has allocated a huge budget in the field of inclusive education, formulated policies for equitable access to quality education for all Nepalese students with autism spectrum disorder in terms of school enrolment, but equity is still far away (Shrestha, et al., 2019). Like any concerned teacher, I always wanted to make an impact on my students with and without ASD, and I wanted to explore how I can properly educate these children and improve their learning skills and progress.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder, and the worldwide number of children with autism is increasing: 1 to 2 % of children worldwide have been diagnosed with autism, which is approximately 52 million (Michelle Heys et al., 2018). Autism is a developmental disability that influences children's social skills, communication skills, and behaviour challenges (James et al., 2002). During my Kindergarten teaching journey, I have found that children with

autism have problems with social interaction, and I used to help them with their daily tasks; such tasks easily managed by other children in the class were sometimes very difficult for children with autism. The common social interaction with peers and other friends were never experienced by the children with autism, which is due to the nature of their neurodevelopmental disorder which includes limited and repetitive behaviour patterns (Rutter, 1968). Children with autism show a variety of symptoms and severity, hence the term, the 'spectrum' is used to denote autism.

Background

In Nepal, teaching is considered one of the toughest jobs as our classrooms comprise students from highly diverse socio-cultural backgrounds (Koirala, 2021); furthermore, from personal experience, teaching children who require special support is especially challenging. To add on this, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented both challenges and opportunities, such as new concept of home-schooling, using ICT in learning and transitioning from face to face class to online class and from online to face to face class, through these experiences teachers have gained knowledge as well as skills. For young learners, the guidance and intervention of their teachers are crucial in both online and face-to-face settings (Mutluer et al., 2020). This study acknowledges teachers' experiences in including children with autism in diverse groups, taking into account the challenges and benefits that arise from this practice.

Nepal's constitution has ensured all children's rights to Education (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) also strongly promotes equality and inclusiveness. In addition, children with special needs have specific rights of enrolment in any school close to their residence to promote inclusiveness in education. According to WHO (2016), 60,000 to 180,000 children are affected by disabilities in Nepal. The newly adopted plan and policy, Disability Rights Act, and the Inclusive Education Policy for Persons with Disabilities, allow all children to study in a safe environment without discrimination. However, neither the infrastructure or facilities are available, and professional development training have not been provided to the concerned stakeholders (Shrestha et al., 2019). Children with special needs require special attention for ensuring their learning progress (Stenhoff, et al., 2020). However, it is not easy for any teacher, including myself, to deal with students with autism in a regular classroom, especially when no specific training is provided. Ferrailio and Harris (2011) have shared that in

the absence of well-trained teachers, students with ASD experience difficulties with different aspects of the school environment such as academic achievement, adjustment, and extra mainstream school activities.

To properly teach children in inclusive mainstream classrooms, early childhood educators require various skills including nurturing skills, with imparting intrinsic motivation being crucial. In this regard, McGee (2006) stated that only enthusiastic, self-motivated, well-trained, and open-minded teachers can achieve good results in the inclusive classroom as the children need constant support and guidance. In our scenario in Nepal, we require special needs teachers or well-trained teachers in every school; these just don't exist in many schools. The inclusive practice of enrolling autistic children in regular classrooms is one of the means to promote equality and equity. Nahlous-Ismail (2010) has stated that in regular classrooms, autistic children often feel challenged academically and behaviourally and lack social interaction. To ensure the needs of autistic children are met and to educate them properly in a meaningful way, teaching strategies play a key role in the learning outcomes of autistic children (Simpson, et al., 2011). Teachers' regular practices on delivering content and concepts to the students in the regular classroom can be more effective if the teacher is well trained and experienced. Hay and Winn (2012) stated that every teacher at all grade levels needs training orientation and increased awareness related to autism best to educate children with ASD in the regular classroom. Similarly, Shrestha et al., (2019) advocated for skilled human resource to educate children with ASD in the Nepali context to promote inclusivity. Where enhanced teachers' skills and understanding of autism has been emphasized, a broad-based and skilled human resource which has sufficient knowledge and a positive attitude towards inclusion is required to provide proper education and opportunities to children with ASD. Researchers emphasize the need for early diagnosis of the child and the availability of resources and appropriate curricula, such as the Individual Educational Plan (IEP), to educate children with ASD. The condition of Nepalese education in terms of inclusiveness with children with ASD is miserable till today (Shrestha et al., 2019). The poor availability of data, timely status updates, and reports related to children with autism has become a barrier to promoting quality education.

In this research, I have explored teachers' educational experiences with ASD children in regular classrooms and have researched the issue of teachers educating Children with ASD. The above background and my own experiences have

rationalized the need for the research, during which I have looked into the issues with a qualitative paradigm and generated information from teachers through interviews.

Statement of the Problem

The prevalence of ASD in children has increased by 500 % since 1992 (Wilson et al., 2017). The rising number of children with ASD and their enrolment in schools is currently a major worldwide concern. Research has shown that it is 5% more prevalent among male children than girl children (Wheller, et al., 2015). The signs and symptoms of autism are believed to be seen in the first three years of a child from birth and remain throughout life. Several kinds of research have been done to find out the reasons behind ASD in children; however, no clear cause has been found until today. In the case of Nepal, I have experienced that parents are also not aware of the symptoms and behaviour of the child with ASD. The parents test and diagnose only after enrolling students in kindergarten and when they suspect their child is not performing similarly to their peers. In the United States of America, early screening and diagnosis facilities are available from 18 months (Pierce, et al., 2019) .According to Shrestha and Santangelo (2014) early diagnosis and timely intervention are missing in Nepal with ASD children. Nepal's Special Education Policy (2017) has ensured the equal participation of children with ASD in regular classes. However, a lack of awareness, insufficient and well-trained teachers, therapists, and poor presence of other stakeholders are the key barriers to educating children with ASD in regular classrooms (Shrestha et al., 2019). When I was teaching child with autism in my regular classroom, I did not have proper awareness about ASD and I had perceived autism in a different manner. I and other colleagues faced problems with the classroom management, especially on the behaviour issues of child with autism. Teachers consider that children with ASD have lots of behaviour problems and are difficult to manage in regular classrooms (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2012). Teachers believe that the behaviour shown by children with autism in regular classrooms distracts other students and are frequently distracted from learning (Ferrailio & Harris, 2011). Positive teachers' attitudes and experience with autistic children are needed for academic and social skills enhancement of the ASD children (Low et al., 2020). However, from the government side in Nepal, only small attempts have been made to promote quality education for children with autism. Previously, the government has incorporated autism under "mental disability" which is often misunderstood as an intellectual disability (Shrestha et al., 2019). Although lots of plans and policies have

been formulated and acts have been amended, there remains a significant lack of trained human resources in Nepal. Insufficient knowledge leads to a limited understanding of students with ASD which has become another barrier and challenge to teachers practising inclusive education (Sansosti & Sansotei, 2012).

The limited special-needs schools and support from non-governmental organizations', awareness among people, promotion of teachers' training, advocacy and development of resources and curriculum, are not able to cover all the current needs of either teachers or students (Shrestha et al., 2019). Due to this, teachers are using regular curricula among the children with ASD which do not meet these children's educational needs. To properly educate children with ASD, skilled professionals are required – these must include specialists with different skill-sets such as occupational, speech, and music therapists, which are significantly beneficial—this needs the collaboration from schools, teachers, parents, and the community (National Research Council, 2001). In the context of Nepal, enrolment of children with ASD is growing in regular classrooms in the Kathmandu Valley but the status of children with ASD and the teachers' experiences in educating children with ASD in regular classrooms is still largely overlooked. Many types of research have been done in the South Asian region, US, Europe and many countries on this issue, but exploration into the early childhood education and teachers' experiences of educating young ASD learners is still in its infancy in the Nepalese context.

As described above, the Constitution of Nepal has assured the rights of people to equal participation, but from my experience as a teacher for more than a decade, teaching children with ASD in regular classrooms is still a big taboo for society. I have collected lots of memories and experiences - some joyful and some bitter - during my teaching career. I have found that although ASD is a developmental disorder, certain more narrow-minded sections of society still believe that ASD is some type of communicable disease. This conservative mind-set is the wrong perspective in relation to children with ASD. I have found that teachers, much influenced by societal prejudices, and largely failed by a lack of training, are not so open to educating children with ASD. If teachers do not give proper attention to students with ASD, they quickly become bored, inattentive, or unmotivated (Tsamoura & Elisavet, 2020). Preparation on the part of the teachers for the daily classroom activities is always necessary before the classroom day begins. However, it is really hard for a teacher with a poor understanding of ASD to come fully prepared

to an inclusive classroom with a plan for diverse students in one class. Teachers who lack awareness, proper information, and understanding regarding autism are not receptive to the inclusive classroom setting and often face challenges while teaching ASD children (Cassady, 2011).

Much research has been conducted on autism, ranging from the medical dynamics to DNA and gene testing to identify probable causes of the condition since 1943 (Ratajczak, 2011). In the western world, several studies have focused on teachers' experiences in educating children with autism, leading to professional development recommendations (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2012). Research findings have also revealed early childhood educators' difficulties, including teaching autistic children at the kindergarten level (Sansosti & Sansoti, 2012). In Sweden, the teachers have a positive attitude towards the inclusion of special needs children in regular classroom (Engstrand & Roll, 2014), however the perspectives on, and understanding of autism in China and Nepal are negative due to limited knowledge about the condition (Ballantyne et al., 2021; Heys et al., 2017; Shrestha et al., 2019).

Several studies have highlighted the lack of research undertaken into autism in Nepal; the study of exploring teachers' experience with inclusion is inadequate in Nepal (Shrestha, 2014), and there is also limited past research undertaken to explore teachers' perspectives and understanding of autism (Lama, 2015); few studies have examined Nepali teachers' perspective on autism, and collecting data from teachers at all levels of schooling, including special and integrated schools, is very limited (Shrestha, 2019). Even in the west, few studies have examined the challenges teachers face when educating children with autism (Lindsay et al., 2013).

After browsing different research centres and investigating the studies conducted on early childhood educators' experiences with educating children with autism and their perceptions of inclusion, I could not find published studies in the context of Nepal. Therefore, these gaps lead me to seek current practices of early childhood educators in inclusive classrooms to shed light on their challenges and identify their current coping strategies to create a more inclusive environment.

My Positionality as a Researcher

Over the past 15 years, I have mostly been involved in early childhood education. I have taught in regular schools and special schools, including children with special needs, although few of the children whom I have taught were diagnosed with autism. As an early childhood educator, I know there are challenges but also a

beauty in including children with autism in regular classrooms. Including children with autism in a classroom fulfils the right of the autistic child to education despite their disorder. As described previously, many laws and policies in Nepal (eg. the Constitution of Nepal of 2072 BS, and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2074) were documented to secure the participation and engagement of persons with disabilities in regular education. In addition, Nepal has ratified many international policies as well as formulated its own domestic policies on the basis that autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder which falls under a specific disability category inside mental disability (Thapaliya, 2016).

The rising number of children with autism in the regular classroom and their enrolment into regular schools somehow shows positive steps toward accepting children with disabilities into mainstream society – this helps to create an inclusive classroom. However, having an autistic child in my own family, the frequently asked questions included: Do we know the concept of inclusion? Do our teachers, the school management and the parents really accept children with autism in a regular classroom? Can the mainstream teaching methods address the needs of special children when there are already other students in the classroom? These common questions are, I believe, those that every parent and educator has in mind, and the educational authorities have no answers. As an MPhil scholar in STEAM Education, I am also encouraged to ask: Do our early childhood educators teaching in a regular classroom impact young children's lives positively? Are the teaching materials, resources, approaches sufficient to address our children's needs? I feel that our teachers from early childhood education are still in a great dilemma on the pedagogical practices, and suffer from lack of training for teaching in an inclusive setting. Research in the field of inclusive education in Nepal concludes that the problem lies in teachers' competency, the lack of professional support and resources, and a negative attitude and lack of knowledge about disabilities, which is still prevalent in our community (Regmi, 2019). Most of the teachers teaching in a regular classroom follow similar teaching pedagogy to all the students. They are including children in their classroom – however, the quality of student inclusion in academic activities is a major focus of this research, as is the type of experience teachers have gathered when teaching an inclusive class academic and other social skills. As a researcher and MPhil scholar, I have endeavoured to examine the state of inclusivity and the experiences of teachers. The idea of STEAM Education, which promotes a

just and flourishing society, was introduced to me during my classes. Transformative STEAM pedagogy was integrated into the MPhil programme to sensitize us to the prejudices we may encounter as educators. Although my thesis topic is not directly related to STEAM Education or innovative pedagogies, I chose to view the context of my research through the lens of STEAM Education. For example, I explored the link between STEAM and autism in early childhood development, an investigated how an integrated learning approach in early childhood education helps children develop holistically, considering their social, cultural, emotional, and physical needs both at home and at school. I also analyzed the advanced technological tools used by teachers and how they facilitate child development, particularly for those with autism.

My thesis attempts to see the world from the child's perspective, taking into account their environment and the support they receive. By doing so, I hope to shed light on the importance of an inclusive education system that caters to the unique needs of every child - this is where I stand in the research where I explore the experiences of educating children with autism. This position has helped me in the analysis of data and the interpretation of how teachers perceive autism, what is their current teaching approach, what challenges they have encountered so far and what are coping mechanisms they have tried to solve the challenges inside the classroom. My own personal teaching experiences in regular classrooms with children with autism may contribute to the field of inclusive education in the context of Nepal. An analysis of the level of awareness about autism and classroom inclusion amongst concerned stakeholders also are a key focus of this research. Hence, my position as a researcher is to explore the teachers' narratives of their challenges and difficulties as well as their pains and pleasures and to analyse and interpret their current teaching practices and the perception of educating children with autism in the regular classroom.

Purpose of the Study

My inquiry aimed to explore the teachers' experiences in educating children with autism spectrum disorder in regular classrooms. The educational experiences included academic and autistic children's behaviour in mainstream classrooms. My study focused on regular schools and kindergarten teachers currently practising inclusive education in classes incorporating children with ASD.

Research Questions

Based on the purpose of my inquiry, I formulated the following research questions.

1. How do early childhood educators narrate their experiences of educating children with autism spectrum disorder in regular classrooms?
2. How do teachers perceive and practice inclusion in the regular classroom?
3. What are the challenges of including children with autism, and how are these teachers coping with the challenges they face in the regular classroom?

Defining Terms

Autism : Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder which affects individuals social skills followed by restrictive and repetitive behaviour (Kim & Rajan,2023)

Lived Experiences: Teachers' personal social, temporal and spatial encounters with the events, their perception and lived feelings, thoughts and action (Van-Manen, 2016)

Regular Classroom: Normal school which enrolled children with and without disabilities based on age and grade level (DeBoer et al., 2011).

Challenges: Teachers issues while educating children

Coping strategy: Teachers strategy to build the resilience to the challenges they face in the classroom

Educators: Teachers who educate children with and without autism, however, educate themselves and others

Delimitations of the Study

This research incorporated teachers' experiences on including children with autism in the mainstream classroom. It emphasized on teachers' current practices while dealing with ASD children in a regular classroom; it has explored the way teachers perceive the term "Autism", their level of knowledge of the condition and their approaches to inclusion. Inclusion is a vast subject, but my research is delimited to the teachers' teaching practices. The five participants for my study were selected

from different pre-schools in Kathmandu Valley. The research aimed to dig deep into the participants' narratives of their current teaching practices. For this study, the participants were selected on the basis that they had some years of experience of teaching children with autism in a regular classroom setting.

Significance of the Study

Teachers' classroom experiences are an integral part of a teachers' journey and influence children's learning outcomes (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2012). Nepal has very few special schools with a limited number of skilled and trained professionals. Enrolment of children with ASD into the regular classroom is also increasing, although regular educational teaching practices and curricula do not meet the unique nature of the needs of an ASD child and are not appropriate for autistic children. Poor awareness amongst parents and different stakeholders and preconceived notions of children with ASD have influenced the way children are educated at school. My research findings had revealed the ways to run smoother and more effective inclusive classes in kindergarten. It tried to explore the neglected areas of educating children with ASD in the regular classroom so that the teachers can have good educational experiences later. Thus, students meet their learning needs (Crocket et al, 2012). I have selected this topic as it is currently neglected and requires focus and consideration by every professional in the education field, especially in the teaching community. This study will help those who are currently involved in teaching ASD children - including the policymakers, the teachers who have special-needs students in their classroom, the school leaders and parents, and different educational stakeholders. As a result, this study will also help learners with such developmental problems.

Dissertation Composition

The thesis consists of eight chapters. In the first chapter, I have introduced the research background. The second chapter reviews National and International literature where thematic, theoretical, policy, and empirical reviews are presented. Chapter three presents and describes my research methods, including a short background of my five participants. In chapter four the individual narratives are presented in three sub-themes. In chapter five, I have explored teachers' perceptions on including children with autism in the regular classroom. Chapter six concerns the challenges that teachers have faced during the educating process, and chapter seven deals with

coping strategies of teaching practices and their challenges. The final chapter, chapter 8, summarises my reflections, findings and conclusion.

Chapter Summary

The chapter starts with my personal vignette regarding how I encountered autism in my teaching journey, and I have shared my experience of teaching children with autism in the regular classroom. I describe my initial feelings, the shock I felt at that time and my reflection of my initial days of teaching child with ASD in a regular classroom. Based upon my personal experiences, I have set the background to the research, the research problem, the purpose and the research questions. The experiences that I gained while teaching individuals with ASD in a regular classroom, how I tried to help children with ASD in school, and the challenges I faced inside the classroom have helped me articulate the problem statement. As a teacher, I believe including children with autism in a regular class where knowledge is delivered and help is provided to the student in basic skills, is an important part of early childhood development. My research question delimits the research on students with ASD, but is focused on teachers' experiences in delivering academic and behavioural lessons inside the school.

CHAPTER II

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

In this section, I have reviewed literature related to my research. The theoretical, empirical, policy, and thematic aspects of autism and teachers' experience educating students with autism in the regular classroom are discussed. This part of the review aims to give the reader a background about children with ASD and teachers' experience in including children with ASD. The literature review leads to enhanced knowledge of the current practice, updates, and research trends. With the help of the described previous research, the knowledge gap has been identified. Hence the coherence between the purpose of the study and the research question has been established strongly through this section.

Thematic Review

In this section, I have reviewed the literature related to my study which I have discussed under the following headings. I also went through several previous research studies closely relevant to my research issue. The thematic review has helped me to build a strong knowledge of my research topic. During this part of my research, I thoroughly reviewed various journals, articles, and book chapters and generated the following themes.

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

It is evident from different sources that the number of Autism cases is increasing over the recent decades (World Health Organisation, 2021). Though different forms of pervasive development disorder – eg. Asperger's syndrome, autism, etc. - are considered separate, the label "spectrum" in autism spectrum disorder, hereon termed as ASD, covers a wide range of symptoms. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological disorder (Orsini & Smith, 2010) and is very common in the early years. It is characterized by problems in communication (i.e. delay or lack of language development), social development (i.e. lack of development of peer relationships, impaired non-verbal behaviour), ritualistic behaviour, and resistance to change (Grant & Nozyce, 2013). Despite every case of ASD being unique on its own, four major categories are paramount in the diagnosis of ASD; communication characteristics, social interaction characteristics, unusual/challenging behaviour

characteristics, and learning characteristics, along with supporting characteristics like unusual patterns of attention, unusual responses to sensory stimuli and anxiety.

As Rice (2008) states, signs and symptoms are shown before the age of 3 followed by impairment in socialisation, communication, and behaviour. It is a lifelong disorder that impacts brain functions. However early intervention has been suggested by the research to create an easier life for autistic people (Shyu et al., 2010). Shyu et al. explains The teacher's awareness, knowledge, and feelings of responsibility towards educating these children to perform well in class and function well in day to day life and to adjust in an inclusive setting need a special curriculum framework to meet the learning needs of a child with autism. The American Psychiatric Association (2016) has stated that children with autism often face delays in development such as language and social skills, and display repetitive behaviour.

Lord et al. (2018) added that autism has become a publicized and a most researched disorder in the last 50 years. Though the symptoms and severity of autism vary from child to child its core features are poor social skills and rigid and repetitive behaviour patterns (Khan et al., 2012). This affects students' communication skills and delays other social development. Some might experienced poor eye contact with children with autism which is also a common symptom of autism (Ryan et al., 2014), and early intervention and proper education make a huge impact on autistic people (Shyu et al., 2010). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-5) states that "the three levels of increasing severity of ASD have been discussed from requiring support, to requiring substantial support, and finally to requiring very substantial support" (Posar et al., 2015. p. 146). In the context of Nepal, there are limited diagnosis centres and skilled human resources for the early intervention of autism (Shrestha, 2019). This has an impact upon the educational learning needs of a student with ASD as well as the experiences of teachers.

Teachers' Experience Including Children with ASD in Regular School

Education is a person's fundamental right; our constitution has provided the policy and provision for all children to get free and compulsory education in an appropriate setting. The growing population of children with disabilities and their enrolment in regular classrooms are observed in developing countries (Nair et al., 2023). All children have the right to get a quality education in the regular classroom. Frequently used terminology in my research includes autism, inclusion, and a regular classroom, meaning children with neurodevelopmental conditions are placed in

general education with his/her typically developing peers. The children with autism were placed in a general education classroom and received educational support in an inclusive setting, which is considered a regular classroom (Bishara, 2016). Early childhood educators face a significant degree of struggle and many challenges to create an environment inclusive enough for the students with ASD in regular classrooms (Lindsay et al., 2013). There are several factors playing a vital role in tracking the behaviour of students with ASD. Despite these hurdles, teachers/educators can thus only do their best to make students with ASD feel more welcomed, understood, loved, and accepted among their peers and teachers and help them achieve greater goals in life (Sheehy & Rofiaha, 2020). Lack of proper workshops, training, adequate funds and other resources, and inadequate support lead to the challenges, and result in teacher's being unable to properly support students with ASD. Segall and Campbell (2012) in their report stated that only 5% of the teachers are professionally well trained to educate children with autism.

At the same time, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stipulates that all children, "should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community" (Article 23, p. 54). In research conducted as part of the *Exploring Educators' Successes and Challenges of Including Children with ASD in Mainstream Classes* by Sally Lindsay, seven essential elements of inclusion were documented to attain a deep and detailed understanding of the scenario. "These elements include visionary leadership, collaboration, refocused use of assessment, support for staff and students, funding, effective parental involvement as well as curricular adaptation and effective instructional practices" (Lindsay et al., 2013, p. 349).

All the above elements are major challenges in enrolling and welcoming students with ASD into regular classrooms. An increase in the complexity of the curriculum and an increased number of students per classroom results in a very difficult situation for teachers when they also have to focus more on the students with ASD, which reduces their attention on other students (Clark et al., 2019). At the same time, inadequate support from the administration with teaching assistants, lack of understanding among peers, and limited peer acceptance makes it harder for both students and teachers (Raudeliunaite & Steponeniene, 2020). To put in words the

sheer amount of time and care students with ASD need within the classrooms is one of the predominant challenges with policy makers and school managers.

Notwithstanding the challenges, teachers can adopt several techniques within the classroom to ease the whole process for including an educating students with ASD. Redesigning the physical environment, modification in assignments, curricula, inputs, outputs, and evaluation methods could go a long way (Meindl et al, 2020). At the same time, evidence based practices, tailoring the different levels and giving instructions in different media would help students with ASD adjust in the classroom with fewer difficulties (Meindl et al., 2020). Promoting positive peer interactions and facilitating easy transition at different levels and stages within and/or outside of the premises could eventually result in attaining a healthy and welcoming environment not only for students with ASD but also all the other students (Zagona et al., 2018).

Moreover, the tendency of parents to live in denial about their children's medical condition makes it difficult to understand the real medical condition of children with ASD (Acharya & Sharma, 2021); this reduces the parent's ability to best facilitate the child's progress and offer the best feasible alternatives. In addition, the responsibility to assure the concerns of parents of other students about the security of students without breaching the privacy of students with ASD could be significantly substantial (Hussein et al., 2019). Furthermore, lack of sufficient training and workshops, inadequate school and federal policies, lack of liberty to formulate diverse strategies, programmes, and plans for students with disability, and non-availability of physical and other resources adds to the challenges and hurdles faced by both teachers and parents (Singal, 2019). From my own experience, there are further challenges faced by teachers to include students with ASD in regular classrooms – these include teachers' awareness, school policy, and lack of knowledge on how to promote an inclusive environment. There is a lack of thorough dialogue and intervention at all levels, which results in the problems becoming more acute. Concerned bodies need to contemplate and work collectively to formulate plans, strategies, and policies and make mainstream classrooms more inclusive for the students (Saggers et al., 2019); this way learning and development can occur properly. Children are an essential part of our society, and the integral part of learning cannot be separated from the socio-cultural perspective as stated by Vygotsky (Verenikina, 2003).

Education During Pandemic and Children with Special Need

The year 2019 will always be remembered globally as a significant period, as the entire world was impacted by the emergence of a novel coronavirus. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected the education sector, possibly more than any other sector. The entire classroom and education process was disrupted by the pandemic over two years in the context of Nepal where the government announced its first lockdown on 24th March 2020 to cope with the Covid-19 outbreak (Basnet et al., 2021). Most of the schools in the Kathmandu valley explored and switched to the online mode of teaching. According to UNESCO (2020) during the first shutdown phase of the educational sector, the media for instruction for teaching were mostly technology based and online as all students were at home. Online teaching has been considered as one of the alternative modes of educating children nationally. However, it has created a more difficult scenario for children with autism who prefer to follow the daily routine and teachers' individual guidance (Hurwitz et al., 2021).

Children with Special Needs (CSN) in regular classes require more attention, and children with autism are included in CSN cases having neuro-developmental disorders (Sophya, 2021). The pandemic has changed the learning pattern and education pattern of students as well as teachers, and the sudden home confinement rules due to lockdown disrupted the autistic children's everyday routine. As stated by Slobodin et al. (2019), the impact of the lockdowns has been shown on the behaviour of children and the increased number of hours spent online compared to normal, which contributed to sleep disorders, hyperactivity, increased aggression of a child and other behavioural issues. Leader et al. (2012) highlighted the teachers' role in teaching children with autism in regular classrooms which increases their teaching and planning burden - especially when collaborative work with other concerned stakeholders and specialists, and even parents, is considered to fulfil the academic need of autistic learners. The pandemic has also increased considerations of the home-schooling concept by parents. The collaboration of parents in educating children with autism is essential to ensure significant educational progress (Simpson & Myles, 2002).

The pandemic has brought challenges as well as opportunities to our educational system. Children with autism have been exposed to the home-schooling concept as well as online learning. It has been observed that during the pandemic period, parents' direct and proper involvement brought positive feedback to autistic

children's learning (Daulay, 2021). In the USA, parents with young children with special needs had problems in remote learning due to learning method variation, despite teachers' continual efforts (Averett, 2021). The pandemic and shutdown of educational institutions brought disruption to the education process, especially in providing equal access to general education and designing instruction for teaching to the child with special needs (Rice, 2022). The pandemic scenario in Nepal is yet to be researched. However, in the context of Nepal, the pandemic seriously affected the lives of persons with disabilities who also suffered from violation of their basic rights during the Covid outbreak (Rohwerder et al., 2021). In our context, the closures of the ECD centres during the pandemic and then the subsequent returning back to school provided many experiences for the early grades' teachers.

Theory of Autism

A person with autism struggles with cognitive domains, especially in the theory of mind (ToM), executive function and central coherence (Pellicano, 2010). The Theory of Mind is a person's ability to mind read which includes the ability to understand one's own beliefs and practises, understanding emotions and predict other people's behaviour; executive function is the mental ability to complete any given task, and central coherence is the brain's ability to process information in detail (Delli et al., 2017). For my study, I have used this theory of autism which incorporates all three neurocognitive theories, to explore the teachers' challenges and coping strategies when faced with neuro-atypical students (ie. with ASD) attending inclusive classes. Impairment of ToM, executive function or central coherence often presents significant challenges for a child, their peers and teachers in inclusive classrooms. The implication of this theory has helped me to understand the challenging behaviour of children with autism shown at the school, and analyse the coping strategies different teachers had made. The ToM deficit in our children with autism are a barrier to develop social interaction with their typically developing peers, and approaching others to communicate (Bamicha & Drigas, 2022). In early childhood education centres, where children with autism encounter teachers, classroom helpers, peers, and other individuals, the lack of pivotal mind reading skills seriously impacts the child's relationship with others (Kana et al., 2015). The weak central coherence in children with autism may allow them to focus on any one part of imparted information, but it may lead to an inability to understand the invisible relationships within the whole

component. In addition, according to de-Jager and Condy (2020), weak central coherence could be interpreted as a strength as well as a challenge for a child with autism - in that when a child is well-focused on a specific detail or a part of a process, the child could build strong skills in a particular aspect which can be an advantage for both child and teacher.

Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) stated that learners with ASD have a natural bias due to struggles in executive functioning skills. It is hard for children with autism to perceive information accurately as compared to children without autism (Olu-Lafe et al., 2014). A student with ASD perceives the world in a fragmented way (Pina et al., 2014). Hence teachers' delivery approach and teachers' expected learning outcomes from learners with ASD in the inclusive classroom can be very challenging to fulfil. The diverse forms of severity and symptoms in children with ASD does not mean all autistic children are mentally incapable to perform certain tasks; some might be really good at memorizing, but have issues with behaviour and comprehension (Ashburner et al., 2010).

It has been found that children with ASD show less performance in executive functioning (Griffith et al., 1999) which impacts the functioning of planning, mental flexibility and impaired inhibitory control. Without significant improvement in education approaches, it will be hard to address autistic children's executive dysfunction consequences in daily lives (Hill, 2004). There is a prevalence of learning disabilities in children with ASD (Chakrabarti & Fombonne, 2001). The executive dysfunction theory concerns autistic children's' behaviour of rigidity and sticking to similar repetitive work patterns. It is hard for students with ASD to understand classroom rules and understand the given assignment and the reason behind the assignment (Clark, 2016). In a regular classroom, children with autism and without autism will be present and during the teachers' content delivery and educating process multiple verbal cues will be given, which are often missed by autistic children. As a result, children with ASD can lag behind in the classroom due to impaired executive functions (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Experienced teachers may have better-educating experiences in a regular classroom with ASD students who have executive dysfunction, and are better able to help them (Cohen et al., 2010). In this respect, the theory of autism has helped me to explore current teachers' perception on the inclusion of autistic children in the regular classroom, and understand that children with autism might exhibit significantly more challenges than their typically

developing peers. The theory also helps teachers to improve their understanding of the child, of their nature, and the continued challenging behaviour they show in the classroom.

Theory of Inclusive Education

For this study, I have chosen the theory of inclusive education as a basis for discussion, as it advocates for the equal participation and access of quality education for all. The theory of inclusive education deals with differentiated instruction in which the needs of differently abled children and autistic students are met. In simply terms, inclusion means being a part of a group, programme, or community (Polat, 2011). When many people from different backgrounds and of different abilities are invited to join a group, this is an example of inclusion. This concept is especially important in schools, where unfortunately there are often news stories about students being excluded for various reasons such as citizenship, race, socioeconomic status, disabilities etc. This exclusive education system prevents many talented individuals from reaching their full potential. It is important to make decisions based on student needs and abilities, rather than other labels or status. The following theoretical framework will make my theoretical stand clear. The Autism Inclusive Collaboration Model developed by Miles and Simpson (1998) considers the full inclusion of students with mild to severe level disabilities in regular education. The supports and aids which are given to the regular education teacher helps to assist the special needs student in their learning. Inclusive education is very important because all children are able to be part of their community and develop a sense of belonging and become better prepared for life in the community as children and adults. It provides better opportunities for holistic learning for all.

From the framework of Miles and Simpson , we have to give children equal opportunities to participate in the classrooms with other students. In an inclusive classroom, children from diverse backgrounds and needs are welcomed and valued. The model prepared by Salend (2011) has four components of inclusion, the first of which is the flexible curriculum, where all children achieve the classroom activities, while at the same time feeling challenged and engaging in the classroom process. The second component concerns fully understanding the children - their interests, needs, challenges, and strengths. The third component is to help children with differentiation in pedagogical practices – Salend strongly advocates for the role of teachers,

caregivers, and the community to practice inclusive education which is the fourth component.

For my study, inclusion refers to the child's equal participation in enrolment in the regular classroom. Hence, children with special needs including autism, are the core of this research. Hornby (2014) has argued that inclusion has been the most confusing terminology for most researchers and we tend to mix the idea of inclusion with social inclusion; he focused mainly on special needs children in the regular classroom, and developed a framework for their inclusion. For my research to explore the teachers' perception and current practices I have used this Hornby framework as I drew out the experiences and challenges of teachers who are involve in educating children with autism in the regular classroom.

This framework by Hornby (2014) opens the door for early childhood educators to best practice inclusion in classrooms with special needs children. Importantly, Hornby considers the most effective teaching practices where children with autism are accepted by the school community, and the strength based practices, where teachers focus more on the strength of a child, and plan the assessment and IEP according to the child's needs and abilities. In the ideal classroom, children with autism are supported by their peers, assistant teachers, and other non-teaching staff. This theory by Hornby also advocates for the active collaboration of parents, teachers and other professionals. As a result, a child with special needs is placed in a regular classroom and receives an education where he/she thrives and reaches his or her potential.

However, firstly the provision of appropriate laws and policies to ensure that inclusive practices are followed need to be in place in the country. Nepal has formulated an inclusive education policy (2017) as well as various acts and rights for the child with a disability. Secondly, schools need to abide by the laws and policies and prepare school environments which provide an appropriate environment for the child with autism. Thirdly, the need of support to the school team from an expert is essential to fulfil the needs of a child with autism. Fourthly, teachers should continuously adapt effective classroom practices and avoid any practices that are not supporting the special needs child. Fifthly, the teachers must be properly trained to enhance their understanding of the ASD condition and their ability to understand the children with autism – thoughtful plans and specially designed activities suited to the ASD children are very important, and the teachers in an inclusive classroom require

continuous professional development to practice evidence based teaching. The theory of inclusive special education claims that actual inclusion happens when teachers are imbued with both strong knowledge and the skills to educate children in an inclusive classroom, and are able to properly partner and collaborate with the parents of ASD children and other relevant professionals from a special education team. Furthermore, a recent study on the inclusive education model (IEM) by Olsson and Nilholm (2023) puts forward four major components for consideration when including a child with autism into regular classrooms – these are placement, specified individualised, general individualised and community. Children with special needs are generally at the centre of inclusion discussions, but this model tries to keep account of developing an education process which meets the needs of all students in the regular classroom.

Social Constructivism

While gathering stories from early childhood educators, I also used another theory, termed social constructivism. This theory has helped me link the social interaction of the cognition development process of students with their educators' experience. For my research, knowledge has been built from the social interaction theories of Vygotsky (2012) – his concepts on constructivism provide potential useful information on classroom teaching and learning practice (Gindis, 1999). My research was focused on inclusive classrooms where all the children are respected and valued in the context of classroom setups, with autistic children in mainstream classrooms. As discussed previously, the symptoms of autistic children vary from child to child. However, their developmental and learning cycles and interactive patterns are usefully described by the social constructivism theory of Jamero (2019) – Jamero describes three important aspects of the theory, which coincide with three aspects of my research: the sociocultural context, social activity, and the teacher's contribution to the child's learning. This theory is concerned with the interaction of the autistic child's social and cultural contextual behaviour in an interaction driven context (Harry et al., 1999).

The constructivism theory is concerned with the co-construction of knowledge. In my study, the knowledge has been socially constructed (Saunders et al., 2009) in order to delve deep into my participants' experiences. For children with autism spectrum disorder co-constructed knowledge from social processes is valid and encouraged (John-Steiner et al., 1996). As autistic children lack social skills and less interaction, symbolic interaction plays a major role in their learning. Their perceived

knowledge and understanding of certain classroom activities are formed in a symbolic way, and the other functions of social interaction became part of their brain development. The major description of the zone of proximal development of the brain relates to autistic children's learning and teacher teaching approaches (Mahn, 1999). Looking at these components from the zone of proximal development makes this clearer.

The social constructivism theory of Vygotsky considers disability as a sociocultural phenomenon, but in Nepal, teachers' perceptions and their experiences are the product of poor access to socio-cultural knowledge (Dixon et al., 2007). The theory emphasises that child development is the same for all children no matter whether they are special or not. The child who is deprived of regular class setups and activities is socially deprived, which further impacts children's learning (Gindis, 1999). Looking at these components from the zone of proximal development makes this clearer. The interactional zone between early childhood educators and autistic children is the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1993). This helps in understating the inner potentiality of a child rather than basing knowledge on just the outer behaviour and individual functioning. Here, the focus is on the strengths of the autistic child, and individual instruction is given to create a positive educational experience (Employment, Workplace Relations, and Education References Committee, 2002); as a result, the teacher and child interaction is more positive. The use of social constructivism in understanding people's opinions is an effective way to construct knowledge, particularly when it comes to shaping public opinion on disabilities (Chiri et al., 2022). National policies and laws play a significant role in this process by providing support and helping individuals understand the complexities of disabilities such as autism. As social constructs are changeable over time, evolving viewpoints on policy can shape and strengthen our understanding of autism. By addressing societal challenges through policy preparation and implementation, we can better understand the influence of social factors on autism and work towards finding effective solutions.

Policy Review

The Government of Nepal has prepared various disability-related policies, endorsed acts, and legislations regarding special education, and these promote equity and inclusion of children in education. Autism Spectrum Disorder is a congenital neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts the functioning of the brain (American

Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Census Report of Nepal (2011) has categorized seven different types of disability 1) Physical disability, 2) Visually impaired, 3) Hearing related impairment, 4) Deaf-Blind, 5) Speech and a hearing disability, 6) Mental disability and 7) Multiple disabilities. Our National Census (2011) stated there is only a 1.49 % disability rate in Nepal; this contradicts various other reports by WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, and according to Thapaliya (2016), the true number is much higher.

Children who lack social skills and show abnormal behaviour are termed children with autism; the NCED has kept autism in a mental disability category (CDC, 2016), while the inclusive education policy of 2017 has kept autism in a different category. The gap between authentic and researchable knowledge is observed here in this contradiction. Due to lack of proper awareness up until 2017, autism has been kept under mental disability and children were compelled to go through the same curricula as those meant for the mentally disabled or intellectually disabled children - for children with ASD, this was not appropriate (Shrestha & Jung, 2018).

The constitution of Nepal 2015 also assures the equal rights of children with disability without any discrimination. Special children's access to regular classroom teaching and learning has been emphasised by the Basic and Primary Education Plan (BPEP, 1991-2001). The Special Education Policy (1996), the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002), the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007), and the thirteenth Five Year Plan (2013-2014) have all put much work in terms of raising the awareness of the general public on people with disabilities and their rights. Although Nepal has ratified several UN disability policies, and is thus bound to be committed to them, there has been a very significant gap in implementation (Baral, 2018). This is a serious issue in the current scenario for autistic children who are not able to receive the benefits which different policies, acts, and constitutions have assured. In this regard, enrolling in a regular classroom might be very challenging for children as well as for teachers (CERID, 2006). However, enrolling children with ASD into regular classrooms has improved over the years following the CDC (2010) special education curriculum and regular ECD curriculum updates from the Government of Nepal, which have opened the door for inclusive classroom opportunities. In terms of early childhood education, the CDC has assured equal opportunity, as well as extra support for those children

who are disabled (CDC, 2016). The results of their efforts and the resulting implications are, however, yet to be seen.

Empirical Review

Children having autism spectrum disorder have often faced difficulties in social skills, communication, and repetitive behaviours (APA, 2011). The number of autistic children is increasing rapidly (Rice, 2009). The teacher often finds it difficult to handle children with ASD in mainstream classrooms because of ASD children's behaviour. Further study revealed that the role of a teacher in nurturing children with autism plays a significant role in a child's overall development (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2012). At kindergarten level, students spend 4 to 5 hours' time in the classroom every working day (CDC, 2017). Teachers and caregivers are the ones who spend most time during school in the classroom - in this scenario, limited knowledge on ASD and special needs children makes it more difficult for teachers to maintain an inclusive classroom (Sansosti & Sansoti, 2012). Data records that 1 in 54 children have ASD worldwide while in the South Asian Region, 1 in 93 children has autism (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021) - however there is no reliable data reported for Nepal. According to Autism Care Nepal (2014), the prevalence of ASD in Nepal is between 250,000 and 300,000, and the symptoms, features, and behaviour of children with ASD vary from one to another. Research has illustrated that though schools promote inclusive settings for children with ASD, they lack meeting the overall needs of the students (Symes & Humphrey, 2010).

In a general school setting, the teacher needs more support and guidance from experts, the school administration and the affected parents to promote inclusive classrooms with ASD children (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Without proper awareness among teachers and lack of resources, negative attitudes toward the ASD children are exacerbated, and many educators are developing feelings of sadness and self-accusation for not improving ASD children's performance in schools (Lindsay, 2013).

The experience of teachers varies across the world. In Sweden, teachers felt good teaching children with ASD and they held a positive attitude towards them (Engstrand & Roll, 2014). Similarly, the Scottish education authority revealed that teachers' experience of working with ASD children was highly valued (Glashan et al., 2004). Teachers from Greece appear to be very supportive in dealing with ASD children, the reason being a good level of working experience and specialization, and

sound basic training which has helped teachers to achieve good experiences with the children and schools (Syriopoulou et al., 2012). There is no doubt that teaching ASD children in kindergarten requires much teaching experience and knowledge regarding how children learn, which clearly identifies the need for more training and support in Nepal.

Teaching children with autism gives a joyful, satisfying feeling if the teachers are supported and are aware of the different teaching strategies required, although it is challenging and stressful for novice and untrained teachers. Grandin (2007) stated that teachers need to understand children with ASD and how their brain works. The small children might experience sensory sensitivities and the teacher needs to help them in coping. Mahler (2016) in his dissertation wrote that when North Eastern Pennsylvanian teachers were asked to share their experience with children with ASD, all participants showed a positive attitude. They shared that at the beginning, they had to understand and learn the child's needs, although sometimes this leads to frustration too. Children with ASD have difficulty in terms of socializing in school activities which pose problems for other students in the mainstream classroom. All the participants in the Pennsylvanian research shared a good experience in spite of challenges in content delivery, student adjustments, assessment, and peer interactions; overall, however, teachers seemed to be very helpful and supportive in terms of teaching children with ASD.

Heys et al. (2017) conducted qualitative research entitled "Understanding parents' and professionals' knowledge and awareness of autism in Nepal" to explore the level of understanding of autism amongst teachers, medical professional and parents in both urban and rural areas of Nepal. The research followed a qualitative approach, where focused group discussions and interviews were undertaken. In this study, the researchers unpacked the key stakeholder's basic level of understanding on the developmental milestone of a child with and without autism. The findings revealed that educators and parents have limited knowledge of autism; early childhood teachers emphasized on the parental role to tackle behavioural issues shown by the child with autism. The study highlighted the need for increased education and awareness among teachers, parents and medical professionals in Nepal to improve early diagnosis and intervention, and the schooling opportunities available for children with autism.

In addition, Lama (2015) also conducted a quantitative and cross-sectional study entitled “Teachers Perspective on the Inclusion of Children with Autism in Mainstream Schools”. The study aimed to elucidate teacher’s perspectives on the inclusion of children with autism in regular schools, along with exploring the challenges faced by the teachers and schools during the process of inclusion. The study found that most of the teachers believed that the children with mild autism can be placed in the regular classroom, and that the factors affecting successful inclusion were considered to be the teacher’s ability to deal with behavioural problems, classroom and curriculum modifications, and the availability of support from medical professionals. The study highlighted the importance of the triangular collaboration between parents, teachers and school management to promote inclusivity.

Shrestha et al. (2019) remark that a skilled human resource base which has the requisite knowledge and a positive attitude towards inclusion, is crucial to successfully educate children with ASD in the Nepali context. They again emphasized the importance of early diagnosis of the child, and the availability of resources, appropriate tools and curricula, such as the Individual Educational Plan (IEP), to properly educate children with ASD. According to Shrestha et al. (2019), the condition of Nepalese education in terms of inclusiveness with children with ASD was miserable at the time of the research, the poor availability of data and timely status updates and reports related to autistic children has become a barrier to promoting quality education of the ASD child.

A study entitled “A Comparison of Knowledge and Experience of Autism Spectrum Disorder among Teachers in the United Kingdom and China” was conducted in both China and the UK by Ballantyne et.al, (2021). The purpose of the study was to examine how the experiences and cultural backgrounds of educators impacts their understanding of autism. This quantitative research revealed that primary and secondary school teachers in government schools in both countries demonstrated a higher level of understanding when the teachers had previous experience of working with a child with autism in their classroom. Additionally, the research found that UK based teachers had a better understanding of autism due to the inclusive educational policies in the country that provided ample opportunities for teachers to work with autistic children. Based on the findings, the research recommended that teacher education programmes include practical knowledge of

working with children with autism before graduation, so that pre-service teachers and potential graduates can gain experience before entering inclusive classrooms.

A study by Mukkiri et al. (2021) conducted in India entitled “Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs and Autism: Status in the Schools of Puducherry, India” aimed to examine the educational practices of teachers and the challenges they face enrolling children with special needs and autism into their classrooms. The study involved the participants of pre-primary and primary schools from both private and government sectors, including regular and special schools. The findings revealed that the enrolment of children with special needs and autism into mainstream regular classrooms was relatively low, with a significant number of children being placed in special schools, despite the country’s inclusive educational policy. Teachers from the special schools encountered challenges related to child behaviour issues, tantrums, hyperactivity and an unbalanced teacher-child ratio, whereas these challenges were not observed in mainstream classrooms and private schools. The research further suggested raising awareness to change parents’ negative attitudes towards inclusion, providing more resources, and offering tailored curriculum to promote inclusivity.

Another phenomenological research by Makaya (2021) on “Rural Teachers’ Perceptions towards the Inclusion of Learners with Autism into Inclusive Classroom Settings in Zimbabwe: A Case of Chivi District Primary Schools” looked into primary school teachers’ perceptions on including children with autism in regular classroom. The findings of this study also indicated that rural school teachers had a limited level of understanding on autism, which resulted in numerous challenges in integrating children with autism into their classrooms. The lack of professional development opportunities, resources and failing to co-operate constructively with parents hindered successful inclusion. The research recommended addressing these barriers through teacher training, availability of teaching resources and raising awareness among parents.

Current research in Australia by Devi et al. (2023) on “Teachers’ Educational Experiences and Preparedness in Teaching Students with Autism” collected the educational experiences of novice teachers who are current university graduates and pre-service teachers studying in the third year of their teacher training course, with the primary focus of the research being on the young teacher’s perception of preparedness for teaching children with autism in mainstream classrooms. The findings emphasized

the need to prepare the student teachers properly with hands-on activities, and the skills and strategies required to address the need of autistic children in inclusive classrooms.

Research Gap

The above literature such as World Health Organization (2021), Grant and Nozyce (2013), Lord et al. (2018), Meindl et al. (2020) to name a few of the key reviews – have generated the meaning of autism in general and pre-schools in particular (Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 2014). The literature review has also revealed examples of teachers' perceptions, inclusive education and teaching practices in different parts of the world eg. Many literature have also suggested teaching strategies and classroom interventions for the teachers (Ballantyne et al., 2021; Mukkiri et al., 2021; Zagona et al., 2018; Makaya, 2021). The literature review also revealed that across the world there are many challenges and barriers to including children with autism in the regular classroom (Lindsay et al., 2013; Devi et al., 2023).

However, the review has also shone a light on the fact that in Nepal, the current practice of early childhood educators, their perceptions, their challenges and their coping strategies are unexplored in relation to inclusive education (Shrestha, 2014, Heys et al., 2017; Shrestha, 2019). In the context of Nepal, these studies reveal the inadequate nature of the process of integrating early childhood educators' perceptions, classroom practices, challenges and coping strategies built within the school community, into the mainstream discussion and policy and plan preparation concerning the inclusion of children with autism into the regular classrooms (Lama, 2015). Hence, my research is different due to methodological gaps in the currently published studies which have been conducted in a quantitative way; there are also gaps in chronology, time frames, and context.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I present the methodology which I have used to conduct my research. I have documented and discuss the research methodology, the approaches, and the research design that are the foundation for my research, including philosophical and ethical considerations, and the research site. This section rationalizes the reasons behind my narrative inquiry.

Research Design

In conducting my research, I employed qualitative research methods which comprise various methods and approaches to study natural life. I have followed an interpretive paradigm since the purpose of my inquiry was to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences in including and educating children with autism spectrum disorder in regular classrooms. I explored how educators narrate their stories who were educating children with ASD. Creswell (2012) has talked about five different approaches of inquiry; for my research, I have selected the narrative inquiry approach as the most appropriate because I was only exploring the experiences of teachers for my study. The narrative research design helped me to collect and tell stories about teachers' experiences and helped in writing narratives of individual experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This research approach in exploring teachers' educating experiences with ASD has helped me to present challenges, and other complexities in their classes (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Data had been collected in the form of interview transcripts, field notes, artefacts, etc. (Saldana, 2014). I interviewed the teacher participants at length in order to extract as much information as possible concerning their perceptions and experiences with ASD children in a regular classroom.

My Philosophical Assumptions

I have discussed philosophical assumptions and philosophical worldviews to better understand what constitutes knowledge. I have articulated these theoretical assumptions in relation to the major agenda of this research study. According to Creswell (2012), "along with methods and procedures, all research and research designs have philosophical assumptions" (p. 5). Below I had elaborated assumptions

underlying research: ontological stance, epistemological stance, and axiological stance, to this research study.

Axiological Stance

Axiology is the study of the nature of value and valuation, and of the kinds of things that are valuable; it is a philosophical approach in discussions on the decision-making process, value and right or wrong decisions, and is understood as a theory of value. Here, both ethics and aesthetic forms of values are incorporated. According to individual context, the sense of value can differ. While conducting my research, I valued my research participants by fully listening to their voices, and all the participants' experiences, arguments, challenges and stories were incorporated into my study. My research is highly affected by individual practice and the realization of things. I explored the knowledge myself and created my own value. So, here, the axiology of my study is taken as value laden. This allowed participants to freely respond to the researcher's question (Merriam, 2014).

Ontological Stance

Ontology is a branch of philosophy, which views the nature of reality; it is the theory of reality (Taylor & Medina, 2011). Reality may be singular or multiple, and for me, reality is not constant, but it differs from person to person - ie. the reality for me may not be the reality for others. Reality is guided by the concept of being, becoming, existence, and the reality of being and its relations. My research paradigm is interpretive and focuses on the multiple interpretations of the participants' stories, and is based on the theory that tools cannot measure beliefs which are better measured by social values and norms. As my study has sought information on the perceptions and inclusion experiences of early childhood educators when including students with ASD in the mainstream classroom, I have explored the teaching challenges, coping strategies experience of teachers dealing with autistic students. Therefore, ontologically, my research works on the premise that teachers who teach children with an autism spectrum disorder in the mainstream classroom have a range of teaching experiences due to the subjective nature of reality in the Nepalese context, and that my perceptions and my participants' perceptions are different. The stories based upon the experiences are the source of educators' understanding. Hence, ontologically my research is based on multiple realities.

Epistemological Stance

In research, we use epistemological assumptions to describe how we acquire knowledge or how we come to know reality. Cooksey and McDonald (2011) added that what we have counted as knowledge in the world is concerned with knowledge's nature, forms and how we can obtain it, and how we share it with other beings in society.

I have generated information from my participants. First, I collected data on the basis of teachers' experience including children with ASD. I observed class activities during my field visits. During data collection, I interviewed the participants. Here, the epistemology of my research was the experiences of participants on teaching children with ASD in inclusive settings, literature, and my own experiences regarding autistic students. Hence, my research's epistemology depended upon the interpretations of participants and my own experiences where I maintained a friendly disposition and consistent collaboration. In other words, this research explored subjective knowledge.

Interpretivism as a Research Paradigm

Willis (2007) explains that “a paradigm is thus a comprehensive belief system, world view, or framework that guides research and practice in a field” (p. 8). Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) argued that each paradigm has its own ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Interpretivism is based on sharing meaning. Interpretive research is oriented towards ethnographic research where participants' observations, interviews, lived experiences are used as a method. The interpretive paradigm aims to understand the culturally different “other” by learning to “stand in their shoes, look through their eyes”, and “feel their pleasure or pain” (Taylor & Medina, 2011, p. 6). Thus, in order to interpret knowledge, interaction and engagement with the participants in their cultural setting is crucial. This paradigm has guided me in obtaining early childhood educators' understanding of the inclusion process and their experiences. Thus, I have documented the classroom context or other cultural settings of the participants through interaction in order to construct knowledge.

Being a novice social science researcher, I tried to be aware of the influential factors of my own values and beliefs while interpreting the participant's thoughts and feelings. One's own hidden assumptions need to be realized and understood while making sense of the perceptions and experiences of the interviewee, as prolonged

interaction with participants is required (Taylor & Medina, 2011). This is essential for the researcher to grasp the participants' subjective understanding of teachers' perceptions and considerable experiences. The paradigm of interpretivism thus provided me with the road map to understand the cultural perspectives of my research participants, and directed me along the appropriate path to complete my research; it has helped me to listen to their stories within their natural setting for a prolonged time to explore what they felt, an experienced, and enabled me to construct inter-subjective knowledge regarding the early childhood educators' lived experiences while simultaneously adapting to the inquiry's emergent nature. Furthermore, I engaged in the natural setting of my research area to gain a more accurate interpretation of the multiple realities embedded in the participants' experiences and interpretations because integrative research methods include narrative inquiry (Taylor et al., 2015).

In conclusion, this paradigm seemed most appropriate to my research issue that focused on inclusion experiences. As the interpretive research paradigm aims to generate reflective understanding and provide contextual interpretation, I was able to reflect on the experiences of the teachers' current practices, perceptions, challenges and coping strategies when including students with an autism spectrum disorder in their regular classes.

Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method

A narrative research design in a qualitative research study describes accounts and stories of individuals and their experiences. Narrative research focuses on individuals' lives, their stories and helps in writing the narrative of individuals' experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This is a research design that "elicits and analyses stories in order to understand people, cultures, and societies" (Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019, p. 1). Narrative research has emerged as a popular form of qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). It often focuses on gathering data of a single individual or group and discussing the events and experiences that took place in the participant's life and the impact it had on the individual. The stories that I have collected from teachers on educating children with autism in regular classrooms, including their perceptions on inclusion and their approaches in coping with the challenges, I used narrative inquiry as my method of enquiry. Reviewing the literature on autism and interacting with my research participants is the basis for this study.

Narrative inquirers describe the living experiences of individuals and interpret them on the basis of the story revealed during the data collection sessions. A good

narrative study reports the stories organised into a chronology, situates them within the setting or context, derives several themes that the stories address, and demonstrates a close collaboration in the narrative project between the researcher and the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). My study has been guided by narrative inquiry, and founded on the role of story as the basis to understand experiences (Atkinson, 2007). Thus narrative inquiry has helped me to inquire and understand about early childhood educators' experiences in their inclusive classroom. All my participants had years of teaching experience including ASD children in their regular classrooms, and I gathered information based on their stories which is the major essence of narrative inquiry (Wells, 2011). Webster and Metrova (2007) stated that the framework for the researcher to interpret the ways human see the world is through stories. This methodology has provided me the framework to collect stories and present the findings in a more meaningful way.

In the course of my study, I explored the starting point of my participants' teaching journeys, their current practices, the experiences they encountered with autistic children, and how they coped with the challenges; I also investigated their visualization of ideal future classrooms, their sociability, their individual perceptions, and the time and place where these experiences occurred (Clandinin, 2006). I connected my participants' stories using these three dimension of narrative inquiry. I undertook an interview with each participant, with questions that were open ended and recorded the interviews. I started with their past experiences up to the present to better understand my participants' perceptions and beliefs towards inclusion. As Webster and Metrova (2007) stated on the framework of narrative inquiry in terms of exploring experiences of the participants through stories, I gathered untold and unheard stories from my participants with the focus on the inclusion of children with special needs and challenges in the regular classroom.

Research Site and Selection of Participants

This study was conducted in Early Childhood Education Centres located in Kathmandu Valley, among early childhood educators who were currently teaching children with ASD in regular classrooms based on purposive sampling. I selected 5 teachers from the Kindergarten level, all of whom had more than three years of working experience in inclusive classrooms and were teaching kindergarten children at least one which was an autistic child somewhere on the spectrum in the class. Purposive examining is particularly exemplified through the key witness strategy

(Lyon & Hardesty, 2005). Through such a purposive sampling method, I selected my research sites and participants.

Keeping the narrative research design in my mind, I requested my research participants to identify a suitable time for the interviews and interactions, a number of which were held with each participant, typically once a week. I mostly conducted informal discussions with my participants. During the first round of interviews, I covered rapport building, familiarising with my research purpose, and clarifying on ethical considerations. The interactions were recorded with consent. The list of my participants and their backgrounds are summarised below; further details can be found in Chapter IV.

Mrs. Ajita (pseudonym) is a 30 years old energetic and enthusiastic Kindergarten teacher. She is the mother of 2 children. She had started her teaching career before covid, and now teaches at one of the pre-schools in Bhaktapur. Currently she is a grade teacher in UKG, has 2 autistic children in her regular classroom. She has been continuously taught autistic children in a regular classroom for the past 3 years, and has undertaken training for teaching young children from one of the reputed training institutions in Lalitpur, as well as attending sessions of an international child development programme. For her, the meaning of education is learning values and culture. She feels that educating young children is enjoyable and fun, and that young learners should not be bothered in terms of their academic performance, rather the focus for this age group should be on encouragement and inspiration, and good social behaviour in society.

Sabita is a 33 years old enthusiastic kindergarten teacher; she is married and, at the time of the interviews, she had a 9 year old son. She has completed her Bachelor in Business Studies (BBS) and currently works with one of the renowned preschools in Kathmandu valley. She has taken training from the Early Childhood Education Centre, Bhanimandal on Teacher Education, and she has 2 children with autism in class. She took 15 days of training on how to teach students with autism and learnt many different approaches to use in an inclusive setting. According to her, educating small children means to inculcate the values and life skills, and strongly believes that autistic students learn much better if they are in a happy mood.

Roshani Thapa is a dedicated pre-school teacher, 43 years old, and a mother of two children; her youngest son is now 8 years old (2023) and diagnosed with mild autism. She was a college lecturer, but she developed an interest in working with

young children after having her own child diagnosed with autism. She has 5 years of working experience at preschool level, and has been teaching autistic children for all of the 5 years in a regular classroom. She has taken training from various organizations regarding educating children, as well on educating children with autism as both a parent and a teacher from the Early Childhood Education Centre, the British Council and at Action for Autism.

Archana is a jolly, humble and unmarried pre-school teacher who is teaching in a mainstream classroom with two autistic children. Archana lives in Sanepa in Lalitpur District with her family; she is the eldest daughter of her family and has two siblings. She has not taken any sort of special training to teach children with autism although she is educating 3 children with autism in her kindergarten class. She is more focused on helping children with the necessary daily basic skills, such as engaging them in lacing activity, eating on their own, toilet training and few simple academic activities. Her job includes the preparation of teaching plans, and to conduct academic activities in the classroom to make them more inclusive. For her, educating children means engaging them in various activities for holistic growth. She completed her bachelor's degree from Tribhuvan University, and took 3 months of Montessori training from Maria Montessori institution.

Parbati is a mother of one child who is 7 years old, originally from Butwal, and currently lives in Sitapaila. She has 3 years of formal teaching experience with autistic children. She is an assistant teacher for grade UKG, and has only taken training on early childhood development in a 1 day workshop at her own school. She has not taken any sort of training to teach children with autism although she is managing 3 children with autism in her class where she works as a shadow teacher.

Data Generation

The data for my research study was generate through the experiences and stories of the early childhood educators teaching children with ASD in regular classrooms. The formal and informal interaction were undertaken to feel both the difficulties and challenges, the pain and the pleasure from the participant educators. Short memos were prepared based on the discussions.

In the case of narrative inquiry, the stories of the participants become the crucial data that need to be collected carefully without losing their meaning because narrative inquiry offers specific qualities of representing and interpreting the data (Ghimire, 2022). Based on this assumption, the data were collected through the in-

depth interview of the participant. Mears (2012) defines in-depth interviews as an interaction that is used to investigate what a participant knows about a topic, including how they would define it. Johnson (2002) stated that the purpose of in-depth interviews is to gather a detailed understanding of an event or topic. Taylor et. al., (2015) emphasized the importance for the researcher to create links with the participants; the researcher must establish rapport with the participants by identifying what is important for them before going directly to the research topic. In that way, the interview can flow around interesting topics for the participants of the study, allowing them to freely express their thoughts.

For this study, I interviewed all my participants based on my research questions on inclusion of young child in the regular classroom. I collected information on the teacher's journey, their early encounters and experiences with autism, current practices, coping strategies to mitigate the challenges teachers faced in the classroom, and their perceptions towards inclusion of child with autism in a regular classroom. In this scenario, I used interview guidelines (presented in the last page, after the References section), and selected unstructured types of questionnaires for the interview. Based on my research questions, an interview protocol was prepared using open-ended questions. At the beginning of the interviews, I took consent for the recording of the interview, asked general questions (most of which were how or why questions), and noted verbal and non-verbal reactions to the questions. Bogdan and Biklen (1997) argued that open-ended questions can be used to obtain as many details as possible, as participants expressed their thoughts with more freedom to this type of question format. In my research, open-ended questions were asked to elicit lived experiences. While interviewing, probing questions were asked to explore their personal experiences, and all answers and reactions were noted. The data were collected in face to face meetings, although some follow up meetings were held online, and recorded with the permission of the research participants. Narrative data collection consists of collecting data using forms with general, emerging questions to permit the participant to generate responses, gathering words or images (Creswell, 2012, p. 205). In addition, I took field notes during or immediately after the interview which complemented the interview data where time, place, context and other relevant information were recorded, such as capturing interview situations, facial expressions, and the expressed or observed feelings of the participants (Merriam, 2014). I conclude

that this method of data collection has provided me with the comprehensive experiences of teachers educating children with ASD.

Data Analysis and Interpretation Processes

When analyzing narrative data, there are various ways and techniques. Initially, I have used the framework provided by Clandinin and Connelly (1990), where my participants' past, present and future stories are recorded as a whole, and analyzed from temporal, social and spatial perspectives. With the framework offered by Clandinin and Connelly (1990), I took the interview in the Nepali language and later transcribed it to English. For the data analysis and interpretation in this study, I transcribed the recorded data interview of the participants, using pseudonyms, and without losing its originality. Transcripts of the interviews were given to the concerned participant to cross-verify the context and ensure clarity and authenticity.

The data were collected in the form of narratives, and the field notes and journal helped me to explore the narratives more clearly. The interviews were transcribed, and field notes, my reflection journal, and participants' reflections were arranged chronologically according to each participant (See Chapter VI). I read and re-read the texts and prepared them in a narrative format and included the contextual information, expression, noted how they shared their stories, the energy level of my participants in the narratives, with the help of the field notes. I also included in the narrative format details on how my participants started teaching, their educational and cultural background, when and where they encountered autism, and their current practices; all of this was interpreted on the basis of learnings from the literature review.

From Chapters V to VII, my interpretation and analysis process followed a thematic analysis; “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 4) to construct the theme on participants' perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies which I explored in my research (Saldana, 2014). I transcribed all data, and after re-reading it, the initial significant codes were identified to obtain a similar pattern. I gathered relevant and standard codes in similar categories which became themes later, and then I coded and categorized similar themes. This helped me develop themes and subthemes based on the teacher's experiences. Based on the purpose and the research questions, meaningful patterns were identified (Clandinin, 2013), such as social challenges, behavior challenges, inclusion in the process, and inclusion in the context. Following

this exercise, I presented the story as it is, then I interpreted the data with my reflections to draw optimal meaning from it with the supportive literature and theoretical framework.

Quality Standards

“The quality standards for each paradigm (e.g., interpretivism, criticalism, postmodernism, and intergalism) are different” (Dahal, 2023, p. 2300). So, quality standards of any research are very important to ensure readers maintain trust in the basic premise of the findings and any subsequent recommendations. Bergman and Coxon (2005) argued that "quality concerns play a central role throughout all steps of the research process in qualitative methods, from the inception of research questions and data collection to the analysis and interpretation of research findings" (p. 1). Being a qualitative researcher and exploring into the lived experiences of my research participants, I undertook the study through the lens of the interpretive paradigm. I used the participant’s vignettes and their narratives, and followed certain recognized research designs to interpret and analyse the collected data. To ensure the quality standard of this study, I have been rigorous in taking trustworthiness and verisimilitude, meaningfulness and authenticity considerations into account.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness in a narrative study, a researcher needs to establish four things: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Shenton, 2004). I began with the premise that any teacher at the kindergarten level who was teaching children with autism had an equal chance of being a part of this study. To maintain credibility as a narrative researcher, I built a close rapport through a prolonged engagement with my participant teachers in a formal and informal setting throughout this research. The transcribed data from their interviews was sent to them to ensure that there is no violation of their views and experiences.

In addition, I have maintained transferability in this study. Transferability of research means how the research findings are useful and similar to others across various educational settings. In relation to this, I believe that the findings of this study are useful for other stakeholders in related and similar fields. As a researcher, I have provided comprehensive descriptions to achieve the desired level of transferability so that readers can relate their own experiences to the research findings. I used the participants' responses without any biases to maintain conformability. Finally, to maintain dependability, I have attempted to maintain the

internal consistency of the data and findings in this study. To maintain internal consistency, I spent a considerable time in multiple interviews and discussions with the same participant to ensure that the participant would not contradict what he or she says in another part of the interview.

Reflexivity

As a researcher, I identified the participants' stories and interpretations as socially embedded in reflexivity (Ghimire, 2022). Exploration into the teachers' narrative followed the ontological basis of multiple realities, and required significant reflection during my research. From the inception of this research, my stand, my role as a researcher, my reflection on my own practices and research, and the reflection on my participants' stories were considered in a reflective way. I remained reflective throughout the data collection process and in the data analysis and interpretation. Concerted and insightful reflection on the teacher's stories of pain and pleasure attempts to avoid the space for personal biasness, thus I have used reflexivity as one of my quality standards.

Authenticity

As my research study was on the teachers' experiences on inclusion of autistic children in regular and inclusive classrooms, it was challenging for me as a researcher to dig out their authentic experiences. In this context, I considered the quality standard of authenticity proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989), and ensured the ethics of the relationship between me and my participants were fair, educative, catalytic, and tactical. The quality standard of fairness within authenticity was maintained by representing the participants as fairly as possible so that they were benefited by learning about their social realities (educative). The quality standard of catalytic within authenticity helped my participants identify problems associated with their social worlds so that the research empowered them to improve their social realities (tactical). Therefore, the quality standard of authenticity helped me maintain my authentic relationship with my participants so that they were able to go deeper into their social realities (the world of autism), to identify their problems related to their pedagogical practices, and to improve their pedagogical skills.

Meaningfulness

According to my understanding, meaningfulness is personal because different participants have their unique experiences and understanding. In this regard, each participant enters their world through their stories and their world experiences are

interpreted and made personally meaningful (Clandinin et al., 2016). Based on this assumption of meaningfulness, the data for my study was generated from the participants in the form of stories on their experiences which are meaningful as it is their lived experiences. The background information about participants, the narratives on their past, present and future has helped this study to discover contextual meaning. According to Josselson (2006), narrative inquiry places emphasis on the creation of meanings that are based upon the research participants' experiences. While exploring my participants teaching experiences with ASD children, the meaningfulness lies at the core of the research. I derived meaning from my participants' rich and complex narratives, and the exhaustive descriptions were supported by the contextual factors to contribute to the meaning-making process. The documentation of minor events, facial expressions, and how my participants elaborated on the stories helped me to capture the complexity of the data provided and understand my participants' lived experiences.

Verisimilitude

I have maintained verisimilitude as another quality standard in this study: verisimilitude means the quality of seeming to be true or having the appearance of being real. To establish verisimilitude in this study, I represented the participants' experiences and stories so that the readers of this study can relate themselves to my writing and produce the vicarious experience of being in a similar situation. This quality standard helped me portray the participants' experiences and stories in this study. Moreover, I maintained the quality standard of verisimilitude by making the stories more engaging so that my readers emotionally and empathetically attached to the stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Ethical Awareness in my Research

To remain ethically sound in any research study is important for a researcher. To ensure ethical consideration in this research study, firstly I obtained the necessary permission from the University. "Ethical issues may stem from the kind of problems investigated by social scientists and the method they use to obtain valid and reliable data" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 51). I then, throughout the research work, fulfilled further ethical protocols such as informed consent, respecting participants, maintaining the privacy of every participant in terms of their identity and the data they provided, and in the use of language. I also ensured that none of the participants had been forced or harmed physically, mentally, or emotionally in order to take part in this study, and I

took their permission before recording any audio, video or written data. I informed each participant about the purpose and objective of this research before involving them in this study, and notified them that they were free to expose their views; pseudonyms have also been used throughout to transcribe and interpret their responses. I respected the cultural perspective of my participants, and the collected information that has been used only for the purpose of this study will be destroyed after completing this study.

Chapter Summary

The third chapter of my thesis has presented the entire research framework of research methodology. At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed my research design followed by the research paradigm, after which I have given my views on philosophical considerations, and then elaborated on the reasons behind the selection of the narrative inquiry for my research. After it, brief description of my research sites and the participants are described, which is followed by details of the data collection process, and the tools that were used in making meaning from the data. In the last section of this chapter, two important components of research, quality standards and ethical considerations, are presented.

CHAPTER IV

EXPERIENCES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

In this chapter, I have presented vignettes of my research participants and have documented the educating experiences of the five participants: Ajita, Archana, Roshani, Sabita and Parbati. This chapter addresses my first research question: How do early childhood educators narrate their experiences of educating children with autism spectrum disorder in regular classrooms?

I explored their teaching journey starting from their background, their entry into the teaching field, their encounters with autism and the current practices in their inclusive classrooms. I learned about their experiences through spending time with each one, and learning about their teaching style, education, academic background, and experiences with autistic children's behaviour. Here, I have re-told the stories shared by my participants considering the temporal, social and spatial dimensions of the narratives. The themes are presented in chronological order, and are discussed in terms of how my participants perceive autism, education and teaching practices, and how the participants evolved over the period of time. Many individuals are involved with their roles and within the stories, and the social relationships to these characters, as well as the power dynamics, social structures and cultural norms are presented in relation to my participants. These have all shaped the participant's experiences and these are also discussed.

Ajita: Loving and Caring

Mrs. Ajita (pseudonym) is a 30 year old, energetic, and enthusiastic kindergarten teacher. She is a mother of 2 children. Her eldest daughter is studying in Grade 2 and her son is in UKG. She started her teaching career four years back, and is now teaching at one of the pre-schools in Kathmandu at the UKG level. She is a grade teacher, has been continuously teaching autistic children in a regular classroom setting for 3 years, and currently has 2 autistic children in her class. She has taken training for teaching young children from one of the reputed training institutions of Lalitpur, and has attended a session of an international child development programme (2021). For her, the meaning of education is essentially about learning values and about culture. Educating young children, for her, is enjoyable and fun. She is not preoccupied with

the academic performance of her young students but prioritises more on developing good social behaviour in society.

I met her in her school after one of my friends introduced her to me on 1 September 2022. I was waiting in a principal's room. Ajita very hesitantly entered the room, and after initial greetings and introductions, the principal left us alone in the room. I explained the reason and purpose of my research. Ajita was very afraid and did not want to open up as she thought that I might disclose the conversation with her school principal, and it would not go well for her. I gradually built a good rapport with her and convinced her regarding my research ethics, especially on confidentiality. I left the school and the next time we met, we had arranged the meeting for a location outside of the school setting. I waited for her in my University Canteen. She saw me and I welcomed her with smile. After our greeting and formal talk, I enjoyed listening to her educational journey. She was clearly feeling more comfortable in this outside setting, and opened up and shared her stories.

Teaching Journey

I was surprised that she had thought of becoming a teacher from an early age. She explained:

I really wanted to become a teacher since my childhood (she had a smile on her face). I love to work with small children. I was a weak student in my initial days, but there was one teacher (with whom I was close and whom I admired). He passed away 5 years back, but he always encouraged me to study and supported me to be a teacher. His nature and devotion towards his teaching profession inspired me to become a teacher. I started teaching from 2015, but discontinued during the Covid pandemic in 2019. I re-joined school in 2021 so I now have been almost 5 years of experience in the teaching profession. (1 September, 2022).

She admitted she didn't take classes during the Covid pandemic as she had to look after her children at home. It is common for young teachers to have a favourite and inspiring teacher in their past who encouraged them to be a teacher. According to Smith and Schmidt (2012), the support and encouragement we received from our favourite teacher has a great influence upon teachers' educational practices. Ajita used to be shy and introverted in her school days. She did not perform well in her academy which decreased her confidence level, but with the pivotal support from this one teacher she was able to cope with all the academic difficulties in the classroom.

Slowly she gained confidence in her extra-curricular activities. She admitted that the six months of support from her favourite teacher significantly changed her life. Her eyes were wet when she recalled her past:

I did not score good marks in examinations, but I discovered my potential and become a happy student. I lost my fear of going to school and my attitude towards other teachers suddenly changed, I became more attentive inside the classroom which helped me to become an average student in the class. (1 September, 2022).

She was so grateful to the teacher that inspired her. She started exploring her inner strengths, and all the suppressed and hidden talents such as dancing, working with friends, and presenting ideas emerged. She completed her higher secondary school examination from a school in Kathmandu valley. To support her education financially she started providing home tuition for nearby children. One of the interesting stories from her home tuition experiences was as follows:

I was involved in the home-to-home teaching service at that time. I am very caring and showed a lot of love and affection to the small children, no matter if I knew them or not. One day I was helping 2 of my students with their homework, their parents were out of the country, and they were left at home with their caregiver. We played a game after completing all their tasks. We played blind fold; one person was blind folded and one of the other two had to pinch the blind folded person. And the blind folded person had to guess who pinched him. We played that game for half an hour. It was already 5:30 pm by the time we finished, and I had to go to another house as well to teach another group. Both refused to allow me to go. They were enjoying the game so much. (1 September, 2022).

She explained how she passed her 3 years of home tutoring experience by creating bonds and becoming a motherly figure to her students. In the beginning I thought that she only had 4-5 years of teaching experience but after hearing from her I came to know that she has almost seven years of teaching experience, including this home tutoring. She got married at the age of 21 and shifted to Lalitpur with her husband. Her husband worked in Dubai, so her main responsibility after marriage was to look after the family and her home. It was only after her marriage she decided to work in the nearby Montessori school. She shared:

All the house chores and family responsibilities made me dull, so I decided to teach in Montessori school, and I took 3-month training from the ABC Trainin Centre (pseudonym) and joined the Montessori school near my house. The training helped me to understand what we need to expect from young learners, their different capacities at different ages, and how teachers are expected to behave with children. I attended an International Child Development (ICDP) training as well, where I learnt how to teach young minds, how to treat them, and techniques to support them emotionally. (1 September, 2022).

She shared that before entering into the classroom (her first school) she was asked to do some training by her school Principal. This training also helped and prepared her for upcoming motherhood. She taught in the nearby Montessori school for 1½ years but left the job when she was pregnant. Researchers claim the role of education and awareness related to a child's overall development can provide a good nurturing opportunity to new parents (Davis et. al., 2019). Now she has two children, both of whom are studying and she told that along with her loving and caring nature, the training to become a teacher had actually helped her become a better parent as it increased her understanding of children. When her first child grew up and started attending school, she returned to teaching.

Encountering Autism

Ajita started her teacher career as a home tutor, where she learnt to make bonds with children before going on to teaching in a Montessori school nearby her home. She had heard about autism from one of her relatives, as the son of this relative's boss had autism. She explained:

I heard the word autism before I began teaching. The employer of one of my relative had a son with autism; however, I did not have any idea of how they were taught inside the classroom. I heard from the relative that his boss's child was psycho and a danger to people around him. So I had very negative perception towards autism in the beginning.

Ajita in the beginning had a lot of misconceptions. She was very scared when she was told to keep an autistic child in her class. She had no specific training and had not attended any sort of session related to it. She was just told to keep the child in her class without any proper training and without any additional background information on the child. She added:

I was so scared about that child in the beginning that I took one week's leave, and the Principal had to convince the child's parent to wait for a week. As I was considered to be one of the most loving and caring teachers, I was recommended to be the one who took this autistic child, so the boy's parents waited until I returned from my leave.

She was mentally not prepared to teach the child in question, but she explored about autism during her one week's leave. She asked her school principal for permission to meet with the child's parents first. After meeting with the parents, she came to know that boy was 9 years old and had mild autism. She was surprised regarding the enrolment of 9-year-old boy in UKG classroom. She spoke about her initial days with the new student inside the classroom:

I had 20 students at that time, and one sister (classroom support staff) was provided for the entire block, so she did not manage to stay inside the class for whole day. I was told by the parents that the boy's cognitive, social and emotional skills hadn't developed properly. That's why, even though he was 9 years old, he was placed in my class. I was doing all my usual tasks in a regular way on that first day. I had a negative view of the autistic child, and he cried the whole day and I had to send him out. I felt upset and agitated and didn't like my class being disturbed. On the first day the autistic student hit one of the other students, who was the son of a school co-ordinator. That made me more furious, and I rushed to the co-ordinator's room and started making a plea that the autistic child be removed from our school. (4 September, 2022).

Ajita openly admitted to her negative remarks regarding the child with autism. Sanz-Cervera et. al. (2017), state that awareness and knowledge about autism help the teacher to have clarity and remove misconceptions. At first Ajita avoided and ignored the child inside the classroom because of her negative perceptions and even wished he was kicked out from school. She admitted to one particular event where she had to remove the child.

I was so frustrated at one point of time; I had decided to quit my job. I am a jolly person and when I work, I work wholeheartedly - but that child's behavioural issues pushed me to my limit. I still remember one event: it was a birthday celebration of one of the students in our class. The parents of the birthday boy were there in the class and Ryan (the child with autism) was

sniffing his hands. He was putting his finger under his pants and smelling his private parts. He was continuously rubbing his private parts and sniffing his hands and most embarrassing thing was he wanted me to smell his hand too. That was so disgusting. He had sniffed my body and my hair previously but on that day, it was so disgusting, I almost vomited. The birthday boy's parents were there, and I was embarrassed and told the sister to take him to another room immediately. After he left for the other room, we had a smooth birthday party. (4 September, 2022).

The habit of smelling body parts frequently is related to a sensory issue and is relatively common in ASD (Grapel et. al., 2015). Ajita admits her first encounter with autism was a nightmare to her. The olfactory sensitivity of a child made her mortified and bitter feelings arose in relation to the child. Eventually, she admitted quitting her job just to avoid that specific child. She was the best teacher and was asked by the school authority to stay and re-join but instead she moved to another school.

Current Teaching Practice

Currently, Ajita is teaching in one of the more reputed pre-schools in Kathmandu Valley. She continued her studies and joined a Bachelor in Humanities, and has been continuously teaching young children despite the bitter experience she faced previously. Her current school principal is a prominent figure in education and has provided Ajita with mentorship in her teaching practice. Speaking of the school environment she said:

When I joined this school, I was happy because the pay scale in this school is comparatively higher, and every Friday we receive teacher training. I got new ideas and learned about emerging teaching approaches. The principal is also very supportive, and she has a solution for every problem.

Ajita started to like teaching again and enjoying the circle of new friendships in her new school setup. At the moment she is teaching 18 students and among them are 2 students with autism. She is the lead teacher of the class, and she has an assistant teacher and one class helper. She shared how her perception towards autism changed after joining this school:

At first, I quit my last job, trying to avoid autism but sometimes the universe conspires to make you face things, and to help remove negative perceptions. We had a session within our regular teacher professional development sessions about differentiated instruction and it helped me realise it is possible

to keep special needs children in a regular classroom set up with the help of a differentiated instruction approach. I recalled my past behaviour and felt guilty. (16 September, 2022).

Ajita's perceptions and her attitude were changing and gradually with the help of better training and greater support, from the likes of the school staff and the school authorities, she became less afraid of having an autistic student. She went on:

I have two autistic children in my class now, Ryan and Avantika (pseudonyms). Ryan is very hyperactive, and he keeps running here and there. My assistant helps me to keep him calm. We let him do table-based activities such as beading and finger painting. Avantika is also mildly autistic; however, she can do simple worksheets, colouring. She can also repeat back to me what I say and participate in other group works. She is 7 years old and transferred from another preschool. With a team approach and good effort, she and Ryan are improving. Ryan, for example, is much better at sitting still now. Both children show some ability when given time to do the task. In group work, they struggle, but when they are given time to do individual tasks, they have shown improvement, especially with their communication skills. They can now communicate hello, hi, bye, come here, sit down, as well as being able to use expressions, such as showing hungry or sad expressions to their parents. And I am happy that both of these children have adapted to the school schedule and have an idea of what we are going to do next. They call their friends by name and can stay in the dining hall, dance room and in the playground for a short while with their friends. Before this progress was made, it was unimaginable to even think them capable of playing with their friends. (16 September, 2022).

Ajita gained ideas to overcome certain behaviour challenges shown by children with autism in the regular classroom. The efforts by her and her team to overcome some of the behavioural issues, such as the sitting issue, helping the children pay attention and communication problems, were addressed with collaborative support. All these small successful steps have an influence upon the learning outcomes of the child. If the child is not able to focus and concentrate and cannot sit still for even a short amount of time, he/she will miss the information shared in the classroom. Certain classroom activities such as finger-painting activities with the right support can improve the sitting tolerance of a child with autism (Irdamurni et al., 2021). The sensory processing issue surrounding a child with autism

leads to high mobility and makes sitting a problem. Appropriate classroom activities, such as the one mentioned above, helps children remain calm and stay focused for a longer time.

Our children can achieve academic as well as developmental and social gain in inclusive classrooms (Mogharreban & Bruns, 2009). When students are provided opportunities to interact with their peers, and express ideas in a welcoming environment, children open up more and express themselves more readily. Ajita's two autistic students are getting the help of a positive environment to adjust their behaviour, and they participate in activities that enhance their communication and physical skills. She continued:

I started loving all the children, those with and without autism. I remember how my favourite teacher supported me during my poor performance in my earlier career and this has inspired me to support these autistic children more. The support I am getting from the school principal, parents and colleagues is praiseworthy. I am having my best time now. I am now very open and ready to teach children with ASD in my regular class. I feel bad that I wanted to avoid these children in the beginning. I would say I am educating them but the meaning of education for children with autism and children without autism is different. The goals and objectives are different. For autistic children I consider educating as being mainly about teaching them social values, life skills and self-help habits, which they have not readily learnt due to their condition. For them to learn basic life skills such as cleaning their nose, wearing underwear, eating on their own, and toileting is essential and someone has to be prepared to teach them. (16 September, 2022).

It is evident that individuals with autism exhibit impairment while doing basic life activities (Bal et. al., 2015). Ajita's experience supported this statement on impairment. As she already stated the purpose for coming to school for both children with and without autism is different due to their different individual needs. The emphasis, for her, remains on teaching Daily Living Skills (DLS) such as teaching them to brush their teeth, eat on their own, wipe their own face and nose, use the toilet, wait in a line, and play in a group. Her concentration for her autism students is on teaching basic activities rather than academic skills. She narrated:

In UKG, they (children with ASD) are learning basic academic skills, number counting, recognizing alphabet, making words and so forth. Their brain does

not function properly in terms of acquiring knowledge in comparison to other children without autism. We are giving them extra time and they have improved a lot in social skills, but they are still not up to the standard of the average UKG child. These autistic children can't write or read; however, both of my children have their own strengths, one is good at drawing, and another is good at recalling and memorization. (16 September, 2022).

She spoke about the normal chronological age and the mental age of child with autism. According to her, the two children with autism, though they are the oldest in the group as per their birth age, but their ability to acquire knowledge and basic intelligence level is low. In the language arts class, children without autism are writing essays about themselves – but basic sentence structure is hard for a child with ASD to understand. She has been using worksheets with them meant for nursery class grade students due to their low knowledge-acquiring level. Often for children with autism their mental age is significantly lower than neurotypical children (Hinnebusch et. al., 2017). They add that the developmental milestone of neurotypical children and neuroatypical children are dissimilar, although their neuro divergent condition helps to acknowledge the strength of a child. For example, her two autistic children are lacking in certain skills and abilities in one area but in other aspects, such in the case of her two children with drawing and recall, they are doing better than neurotypical children. She again spoke of the role of others in educating these children:

If parents support and nurture their child properly at home, I think the teacher's work and tension will be halved. To increase the effectiveness and fun involved in teaching, it is important to understand the child and know the child's surrounding, their parents, their friends, and favourite people or possessions. We should know everything which is related to our child, and parents' engagement plays a pivotal role here. Normally we introduced one concept for a week, those children who can easily grab the concept it is easy for them, and they learn the idea of the concept in no time. But children with autism and other students who are academically less strong need time to understand the particular concept on their own, and if parents are not supportive enough, and don't continue our work at home, all our hard works goes in vain. The effective learning of a child, especially one with autism, depends on a team approach between the teacher and parent. If they support and collaborate with us and communicate with us, the teaching experiences

will be better. And the parents of my two autistic children are very supportive. Still, I feel bad when parents expect too much from their autistic child. They know their children are incapable of doing some things, and sometimes when their expectations are unrealistic, it is disheartening. (16 September, 2022).

Ajita pointed out that parents are the first teachers and are the lifelong teachers of their children. When a child enters a school for the first time, their social circle is expanded, and they make new friends, learn new concepts and build new habits – however, all children still need support from their parents to do their assignments at home, or go over what they have been learning in the school. Parents can help their children perform better in school by helping them have a positive attitude towards learning and by always motivating them. The role of family is perhaps more essential and necessary when it comes to educating a child with autism. The terminology of “the Family-School partnership” emphasizes the parent’s role in educational planning and activities to be done at home and school (Blair et. al., 2021), and this partnership can make children’s life more comfortable and easier. The collaboration between home and school helps to maintain balanced expectations of a child and her/his academic performance.

Archana: Friendly Lady

Ms. Archana (pseudonym) is a 25-year-old humble and polite pre-school teacher. She is the eldest daughter of her family, currently living in Lalitpur. She has two siblings; one is studying in grade eight and the other is studying in grade five. Both of her parents work in co-operative finance. She has been teaching for four years. She has completed a bachelor’s in social work and is now preparing for her Masters level entrance examination.

Currently she is teaching in UKG as a grade teacher. She has been teaching children with and without autism in school for three years. Last year she had three children with autism but at the moment she has only one child with ASD in her regular classroom. She has 20 students, and there is one Assistant Teacher in her class. She has taken training from the British Council on the “fundamentals of teaching”, and has also completed three months of Montessori training provided by her previous school. She sees educating children as essentially being about creating a learning space for children in which they can learn and grow. She also endeavours to make this learning space a fun filled activity centre where students are not forced to

do certain activities. Archana believes in the importance of self-motivation and also prioritises creating a child friendly space.

When I first went to meet Archana in her school on 6th September 2022, the school principal had invited me at 2.30 pm; however, as he was busy in a meeting, I was requested to sit inside the classroom with Archana. Earlier we had spoken on the phone, so she was aware of my presence at school that day. I remember it was a beautiful sunny day when I received approval by the school authorities to observe her classroom.

She was conducting a circle time and preparing all her students for going home. She greeted all the children as they gathered, and they sat on cushions in a circular shape. She had one child with autism in her regular classroom, and this boy was sitting beside the Classroom Assistant. She helped all the students to join their hands and repeat the thank you prayer. All the children were joining hands and closing their eyes and the peaceful environment of the classroom encouraged me to close my eyes and say the prayer too. All of us thanked God for an amazing day. Then she recapped the day, reminding the class that *“today we learnt to describe a picture involving an old man and his wise monkey”*. It seems this was part of their language class, in which they were studying various stories. She asked all her children how that wise monkey saved his masters life and the children responded enthusiastically.

Then she did some maths revision; that day, they had learnt what number is greater and lesser and were shown some symbols. She showed them a number six on her left and a number 2 on her right, then she asked which number is greater. She picked out one particular student and that student gave the answer. Then she held up a picture of the number 3 in one hand and another picture of the number 3 in her other hand and asked again which number is greater. The child with autism who was sitting beside the classroom assistant answered the question by saying both are equal. It was good sitting observing these activities. Finally, the teacher thanked all her students for being nice at school, then the Assistant Teacher and classroom helper helped all the students comb their hair, and all the children got their bags. The boy with autism also got his bag from the hanger and said goodbye before leaving with his sister.

Teaching Journey

I remained waiting inside the classroom and Archana returned smiling and greeted me, *Namaskar maam, sorry I was busy sending all our student home, but now*

I am available for you. Her welcoming nature made me feel more comfortable. She asked me to sit in a chair which was in the corner of the classroom.

She began to tell me about her teaching journey, how she started teaching, her educational background, and her current practices. She said:

I had completed my plus two examination. I am from a management background. I always wanted to work in the banking sector and never thought of being a teacher – however, I ended up being a teacher! The College Head asked me and my friend to work in the pre-school of my plus 2 college, and utilize the holidays. My friend refused the offer, but I agreed and joined the school's pre-school in which I had done my plus two higher secondary level education. (6 September, 2022).

Archana explained that it was never her first choice to be a teacher, but she decided it would be a good idea to utilize her free time, so she joined the pre-school. She had chosen accountancy as a major subject in her Plus Two with a view to becoming a banker. Before entering into the classroom, she had not taken any training regarding teaching young children. However, she now has her bachelor's degree in social work and is preparing for her Masters level entrance examination. She came across as a humble, cheerful person. She said that she never thought she would find teaching so interesting but remembers how she loved to be with children and to help her young siblings in their homework at home. She continued:

I was 19 and half when I completed my plus two level. I had a friend circle who loved going out and hiking. The pocket money I received from my parents was not sufficient for me to socialize with, so I decided to be a teacher because I was offered Rs. 10,000 per month. I was not that serious about the job at first, but everything changed after entering into the classroom. (6 September, 2022).

Archana is kind lady and although she didn't know what to expect, she always had affection towards young children. She was the eldest daughter of her family and there were 2 younger siblings at home, and it was her responsibility to look after them, helping in their homework, preparing them for school because both of her parents worked at office jobs. Continuing her story, she stated:

The first day of my school was memorable. The principal put me in the play group class. There were around 15-16 students and one sister. The teacher who was teaching that class left the school without prior notice. I was just

placed inside the classroom and left to fend for myself. I did not know what to do and how to handle these children. The school sister asked me to sing a song. I sang “piratiko chata odhaua” (laughing out loudly). The children enjoyed that song because that song was something which was trending at that time. In that first day, I sang a number of different songs and just did what the sister asked me to do. She was my mentor at that time. (6th September, 2022).

She found it all so new and strange. She was not given much instruction on how or what to teach but was just told not to physically punish the children - but besides that, she was allowed to do anything that she felt would engage the children. She continued:

At the end of my first day, after the children and the sister left the school in the van, I decided to go to another class. The class was L.K.G. (lower kindergarten). I met two teachers there, and I saw their lesson plans. I was so surprised when I saw their plans. They were weekly lesson plans, and all the activities to be done throughout the week were mentioned. One of the teachers asked me to prepare a lesson plan for tomorrow’s class. I used previous plans from the play group, and copied all the activities as it was. It included recognizing the alphabet, some work with numbers, as well as writing and copying activities. I spoke to the two teachers about how I spent my first day, and how I must have sung about seventy songs! (6 September, 2022).

Archana spoke of the importance of a holistic approach. She realized on her first day that teaching children requires a lot of preparation, that involved looking for appropriate content and the use of varied subjects that are aimed at engaging students. She realized that her student group were very smart and she needed to pick academic activities that were suitable. It was wonderful how they sang along with her, danced to her songs and so easily accepted her though she was a new teacher. She saw the tremendous potential the children had - and in trying to realise this potential, she took a lot of advice from the senior teachers in the early days.

Encountering Autism

Archana took part in three months of Montessori training from her first school. After receiving the training, she was promoted to UKG grade as a lead teacher, and narrated how she first encountered autism. One day her school principal called her in to the office and introduced her to new parents; the boy’s parents were medical doctors. *They were there with their child, and he was probably 5 or 6 years old. The*

principal sir introduced me and shared that their child was autistic. It was the first time she had heard the word autism. I did not know what it was? She acted very normally, and the next day welcomed the new child to her class. She said that at first glance she was sure that the boy had some issues, because he was restless, and his parents were holding his hands. He was trying to stand on a sofa and take the trophy which was near the table. She tried to be light-hearted around the child and thought that child was hyperactive. She went on:

The next day, I was trying to run the class following the regular schedule which involved the morning activity, assembly and writing activities. I noticed the new boy with ASD was being disruptive and ruining the classroom environment. All the students were well disciplined and behaved well but the new boy didn't want to participate in group activity nor listen to me or the Assistant Teacher. He banged the door and would not stay inside the classroom. (12 September, 2022).

Studies suggest that children with autism require firm daily routines and an unexpected environment can create stress for the child, and the transition from one school to another, which this new boy was experiencing, can make a child with autism more vulnerable (Lequia et. al., 2015). When the child with autism is not getting proper information about his new environment, it is difficult for him, the teacher, his peers, and makes it harder for him to adjust to the new environment. The challenging behaviour which can be seen in his running away from the classroom and banging the door is due to a difficulty in transition (Schmit et. al., 2000). Archana pointed out:

The school authorities took the admissions of special needs children without any preparation and planning. They sent the child with autism directly to the classroom and I was left to deal with him, without any support. I didn't know the background of the student and was not aware of any techniques that might help me to deal with the child. (12 September, 2022).

She expressed her bitter experience and how her first encounter became tougher and tougher. She had completed a three-month Montessori teacher training course but was not able to handle and understand the child. She expressed again her disappointment at not been given any information about the child's background despite coming from a well-educated family. Archana continued:

I shared my classroom difficulties with his parents in a phone call. His mother said that she would send a person to look after her child. She used the word

“shadow teacher” or support teacher and I was so happy when I heard that. The class soon had myself, my assistant teacher, and a personal teacher for the boy in question, who helped a lot during the child’s initial days of teaching. I have noticed that the child often feels irritated when his personal teacher was absent. He was not comfortable with us, but slowly we changed our roles, even in the presence of his personal teacher, and this helped him with his work and feeding, as he slowly came to accept us too. (12 September, 2022).

Archana further explained how the personal teacher helped the child to adjust inside the classroom and helped him to participate in various classroom activities. She further shared that by continuing to talk to the child’s parents, she came to know about the likes and dislikes of their child. As stated, both of the child’s parents were from medical field so they were able to help her to understand autism. She shared all the information she received from the parents with her Assistant Teacher as well as any other classroom helpers. She admitted that her work with autism have been very difficult if she had not received the support from the parents and the personal teacher. She understood that this was ‘shadow teaching’, and this made her teaching journey easier. The personal teacher acted as a ‘shadow teacher’ by directly working with the child on a one-to-one basis, helping him to do all the given tasks inside the classroom. The shadow teacher assists special need children to have better academic and social skills inside the classroom (Hamid et. al., 2020). Over time, the boy in her class adjusted well and improved academically as well as socially.

Current Teaching Practice

At the moment, Archana has been teaching in pre-school for UKG graders. She is teaching 20 children and among them she believes that there are two with special needs. She did not mention the second student, who she feels has many symptoms associated with autism as currently the parents refuse to have the child examined and do not accept his different behaviour in the class.

Archana has learned that the role of parents is crucial for children’s holistic development; when parents are not supportive it makes everything harder. *In school I have co-teachers and an extra sister, without whom I would not be able to handle this inclusive class. These extra supports are essential in helping the two children mentioned above with their academic, writing and other activities such as Montessori*

lab exercises, eating, playing, and using the washroom; they stand by these children throughout the day.

She again emphasized on the role of others, and the need for a team approach, when dealing with children with special needs:

At the same time, we should always be careful regarding the people we choose to have in a class. Children often get annoyed when they see three or four adults in one class and talked about having too many staff producing too many instructions and too many tasks to be accomplished. The children might not enjoy it. Hence the number of adult workers in a class and their different roles had to be planned carefully beforehand.

Children with autism like visual cues and clear instructions. These children need a longer time to process the information from the stages of input to generating output (APA, 2000). Archana admitted that her special need students often face difficulty when too many people instruct the child. Sometimes it can be too confusing with the lead teacher, assistant teacher, shadow teacher, classroom helper, and peers all involved in the classroom. She went on:

Sometimes the difficulty is too great, and it is not fair to expect an ordinary teacher to cope. For example, though I have been years in teaching last year, a student who had Down Syndrome with autism enrolled. We were so confused what to do with that child, we didn't know what to teach and how to teach. Eventually, we had to refer him to a special school as there were no trained teachers. I was not able to handle the new child because I am not a special educator, though I have been able to cope with children who had mild or moderate levels of autism. (15 September, 2022)

Archana was in a dilemma. But she knows sometimes it is best to refer a student with autism if they are not learning or coping well in a regular classroom. Archana shared that the school authorities in her school never deny a special needs child from enrolment, but due to difficulties after they have enrolled, she has at times had to recommend transferring a student to a special school. Hockenbury et. al., 2000 have emphasized the role of special education schools where children learn from the right method of instruction which is helpful for an atypical student. Archana further narrated:

The symptoms of every special needs child's are different. The teaching approach and other behavioural approaches have also to be different from

child to child. As a teacher I am confident in my abilities, but I will always do better with help from others, such as specialist counsellors and doctors, as well as the parents. Sadly, such supports are not always there; for example, the school cannot hire a full time psychologist. I have been requesting to have one special educator, but there is still limited manpower. The school team and I are doing what we can and are happy that we have already helped some students with special needs. (15th September, 2022).

Archana shared her difficulty in getting the right support, and further elaborated another issue:

The one problem I am facing right now is other children often get offended by the nature and behaviour of the Autistic children, and sometimes I have found that they has been some bullying. Atish (one child with autism) was locked inside the bathroom by one of his friends – despite having one person looking after him, still Atish has been bullied. So we must be constantly vigilant. Another problem is when we give extra care to autistic children, other students get jealous. There is another problem around grades. Atish and Saurya require academic support and need extra care, but the school management don't allow us to give students poor grades. I give all students excellent grades, and this causes complaints by other students and their parents. (15 September, 2022).

Archana added that the difficulty in communicating with an autistic child often pushes them into the risk zone of bullying. The staff's attention, and the tendency to give the child with autism the same marks, continues to cause other students to dislike them, and some other parents as well. Archana commented on some of the things she has been focusing on in her regular classroom:

Firstly, more training is crucial, this way we will be better able to understand and help these children and create a BiG impact in their lives. I am just doing random online research and following it in school. Secondly, resources are essential. These children need a variety of resources relevant to their disability. We do not have the resources and so it's really hard for them to engage all the time. Thirdly, teamwork and co-operation from the school management and the parents is crucial. We must treat it as a holistic problem. Fourthly, there is the problem with the curriculum. I am making my own curriculum and other syllabus for autistic children that suit their needs, but I

am worried if these children transfer to another school, they will not get the service and support they have received at this school. (15 September, 2022).

She again emphasizes the role of educating teachers with special needs students, preparing, planning the extra resources required, exploring teaching methodologies on the internet, and seeking professional support when needed. She pointed to the work done by her students and strives to engage the equal participation of all children in her class, which is also a major component of the inclusive classroom (Lynch & Irvine, 2009). She continued:

We should give all students to have exposure in a normal environment. The boy, you have seen him with the assistant, used to keep on shouting without reason, but with our efforts, slowly we have noticed that the child is being engaged in other class activities and reduces shouting. They throw tantrums sometimes but in an inclusive setting child learn from other children what kind of behaviour is acceptable, and I have found that the level of tantrums has decreased over the period of time. (15 September, 2022).

She has also incorporated a peer learning approach in her teaching, where students are kept in a group, sometimes in pairs to exchange ideas or do certain tasks. Archana noticed how the other children help her special needs child by acting as role models. These peer group exercises have helped improve the manners of the special needs child. It provided an opportunity for her two autistic children to share their behaviour, nature, likes and dislikes with other students, and it helps the other students to accept and adjust to the behaviours of the autistic child in a learning environment. She carefully assigned certain children to work in a group with the autistic children, and with the use of play groups helped to improve social skills. Weiss and Harris (2001) recommend incorporating peer learning inside the classroom as it is the great tool to develop social skills for children with and without autism. Archana added:

Something I recently came to know is, that the interests of these autistic children, of both my autistic students, are unique. Atish, for example, is fond of loud music – he enjoys extremely loud music and big sounds. Most students do not like loud noise, our ears cannot support music that is too loud, but he gets excited when he hears loud noises or music. We have a roof made of steel plates, and last Friday we had heavy rainfall in our locality - Atish was so

excited to hear the heavy rainfall on the roof! He wanted to go outside. He insisted on being brought out and enjoyed the downfall. If I did not let him be in rain, he might have become hyper and start harming his friends, and possibly enjoy listening to his friends screaming in protest. (15 September, 2022).

Children with autism experience sensory information differently than others which has a direct effect on how they are living in normal life (Mottron et. at., 2006). As Archana has outlined above, Atish seeks high volume sounds due to his sensory sensitivity. Archana gives her autistic student her personal headphones and allows him to play loud music, or gives her time to play musical instruments with him - for example, letting him play with the wind chimes. She finds these interventional strategies help. People with autism may over-react or under-react to different senses. The DSM-5 (the standard classification of mental disorders in the USA) has incorporated in its list of mental illnesses, hyper sensitivity or hypo sensitivity along with repetitive and restrictive behaviours (APA, 2013). She continued:

Once Atish had the habit of smelling his genitals, and later I came to know from his parents that I can put Sancho or another unpleasant smelling substance on his hands to discourage him from smelling his private parts. His parents had benefitted by taken PCTP Training from Autism Care Nepal. Both of them are interested in caring for their autistic child and improving his behaviour. They have been very supportive of me. (15 September, 2022).

Archana went on to say that Atish continues to seek out strong smells, and had to be taught that sniffing the teacher's body or hair was unacceptable in the classroom environment, and that smelling one's private parts is embarrassing and unhygienic for a child. The tips his parents provided helped the teacher tackle these bad habit.

Sabita: Soft Hearted Personality

Sabita Lama was born in Darjeeling, and is the youngest member of her family. From her early childhood she was brought up in a 'pampering' environment. She was the only girl among the relatives on her father's side. She is now a 33-year-old kindergarten teacher. It was never her dream to be a teacher, but it happened due to a chance event. Her sister-in-law was a grade teacher in a nearby pre-school. She became pregnant and she asked that Sabita be her replacement. Sabita enjoyed teaching since then and when sister-in-law returned from maternity leave she continued her teaching as she found it matched her interests.

Sabita is now married and has a 9-year-old son. She has completed her BBS and is currently working with one of the preschools in Kathmandu valley. She has taken training from the Early Childhood Education Centre, Bhanimandal on Teacher Education. She has 2 children with autism in her class, and the school sent her to take training from Autism Care Nepal. She took 15 days of training on how to teach students with autism and learned many different approaches suitable for a regular classroom setting. She is interested in developing her student's life skills and emphasizes the wellbeing of a child especially trying to help create a happy mood as this enables better learning.

At first, I met Sabita in a café, on 2 September 2022. We were supposed to meet at 5 pm, after her school duty. She was coming from Kalanki, and I waited for her in Satdobato; it took almost 45 minutes for her to reach my place. She looked tired and was sweating after her ten minutes hurried walk to the café. She humbly greeted me and apologised for being late, though she questioned the time of our meeting. I suggested a different interview time for our next meeting. She said she was ok with that; her husband was looking after her son and she is living with her mother in law so she had no problem to give time in the evening. In a funny way she told me not to schedule on weekend days. She said that the weekend time is saved for her family; I smiled and continue my informal talk with her.

Teaching Journey

Sabita grew up in India, completed her higher secondary level education from Darjeeling, and wanted to be a musician. She is from a Christian background and loves playing keyboard, Casio or piano for her Christian fellowship. When she got married to her husband, Mr Bhim, he was a college lecturer in one of the educational institutions of Darjeeling. After some family conflict, they decided to move from India to Kathmandu and started living here. Her husband used to teach in a few colleges as a part time employee, and Sabita was a full-time housewife.

One day she heard the news about her sister-in-law being pregnant and she was requested to be her substitute for a couple of months. Teaching was never her dream job but she was getting bored at home and wanted to explore something different in her life. She agreed and joined her sister-in law's school and became a grade teacher in the UKG class. She said that there was no cultural shock when she joined the school as a teacher. She was aware about children's need and different approaches to engage them but she had never had any formal teaching experience.

She had some experience with young children, however, as she grew up in a Christian family and had helped her mother to run Sunday school and special bible classes for young children.

Her mother was a Sunday school teacher, and she always took Sabita with her to the Sunday school. Sabita was very good at these Sunday school activities, and she was grateful to her mother who always encouraged her to teach the young children. *Under her guidance, I took 3 days training on teaching Sunday school students. Story time, sharing stories from the bible and talking about morals, was one of the favourite parts of my teaching.*

Do you see these scars?, she asked. She showed me a scar on the back of her palm, and said the scar was a gift from her science teacher during Standard 9.

I never understood chemistry, and he hit me with the duster, but did not notice the duster had a nail on the top of it; that incident put me off the idea of being a teacher, she explained. *I thought that teachers were old and traditional and did not know how to love - most of my teachers were like that, and I never desired to be a teacher like them.*

Sabita often used to be punished by her teachers in her childhood and high school days, and never had any interest in the academic curricula. Nevertheless, she used to be very popular in school due to her magical voice and the way she played guitar and piano.

In contrast to the traditional teachers and her bitter experiences in school, she saw her mother being humble and polite as she taught Sunday school. Sabita again shared that though the Sunday school was run by a group of Christian people and the job was voluntary, *my mother never failed to fulfil her duty. She used to make a plan for the weekly Sunday school, although there was no one to monitor her. Still my mother is a religious person and has a fear of god and respect towards him. She was honest with her work.*

Hence joining a new school was not a challenge for Sabita because she knew how to prepare and had a good role model in her mother. She also knew what to expect from the children.

The difference was just when I was with my mother, she used to take a lead and I just acted as her helper, while at the new school all the responsibility was on my shoulders but I was prepared for it," she stated.

On the very first day of her school, she prepared a rough plan. She planned her greeting and what activities she will be doing with the children. The additional information from her sister-in-law also helped her to have a smooth placement in her first job. She narrated:

It was a Thursday. I entered into the school, waited in the reception and met the Vice Principal. He asked me about my family background in English. I studied in Darjeeling in an English medium school, so it was not that discomforting to talk to him regarding myself. He was very impressed the way I talked and the level of my confidence. He asked me to teach English in grade 6 and 7 from the new session. I replied positively and went to UKG class. On the first day, I started my class with a warm greeting, and basic class works which had already been prepared by another UKG teacher. In this school, there were two sections for all the grades, each with 13-14 students. One thing I remember from my first day at the school was the way one or two students, I forgot their names, kept on asking so many unnatural questions. In between, my husband had called me on the phone, I picked up the call and told him that I couldn't talk now as I was in class so he hung up. Children are so observant, and they wanted to know who had called me. I fall in love with them. (2 September, 2022).

Sabita created strong bonds with her children in her initial days of teaching. She was interested in their different cultures. She frequently let her student visited to school library, and her different, friendly approach to teaching students was appreciated by other school staff.

She told me that that she had only one bitter experience:

I was appreciated by all of my colleague but there was one staff member, who I heard was the oldest member of staff in that school, and she did not like me. I am good with arts and crafts, and once you are into teaching you should know these skills - and she used to copy my all ideas. She was also in a UKG grade but in another section, and normally in other class – however, the homework classes were taken in the same room. Normally nursery class teachers and LKG class teachers sit every day after school and prepare their classwork in a joint collaboration. My partner, this older teacher in question, never shared any sort of academic ideas with me, and often ignored my presence. Though

both of us were teaching in a same grade, the method, classroom lesson plan, activities were different. (2 September, 2022).

While she was not getting support from her colleague, she mentioned that she designed activity plans and classwork plans by asking other colleagues. Many times, she heard parents complaining about the fact that the courses for UKG in both classes were different.

The teacher who didn't like her from the other UKG section, focused more on academic writing. She used to give huge chunks of homework to the students, while Sabita, in contrast, followed a learning by play method. She taught students in a fun way, focusing more on students reading skills. Not all the parents liked that approach, but every time she was defended by the Vice Principal of the school. She said that later, after her sister-in-law returned after maternity leave, she also focused more on academic skills. The initial years of her teaching were well spent following the play method, and attending training from the Early Childhood Education Centre, which added more value to her teaching.

Encountering Autism

Her first encounter with autism started with some myths. She was a trained teacher by then and continuously received support from her husband, who was a lecturer. Her teaching journey was going well, everything was going smoothly. After four or five years her team had to enrol one child in their class whose behaviour was different from the other children in the class.

“At first I thought the boy was from abroad and maybe he was not able to adjust in our school context, however 6 months passed by still there was no change in his behaviour” she said.

She narrated her story encountering autism:

At first, I was unaware of the terminology surrounding autism. My husband helped me to know about this terminology in the beginning. The boy in question was from Singapore. He was 5½ years old, but he was very childish. I questioned to principal regarding his nature, and after the principal observed the child she recommended the parents bring their son for a check-up in hospital. I and the Principal were continuously saying that the child is very abnormal in his behaviour, but the parents showed no concern. During the parent teacher meeting also, I again spoke to the parents regarding his behaviour in class; for example, he made no eye contact with others, but the

parents continued to deny everything and repeated that he was normal at home. It was only after a year that the parents also accepted that their child was somehow different than children. The child was 5.5 years old but how careless his parents were, as every time I had to tell them their child was different and made no eye contact as well as being non-verbal, they refused to take action. Later, I came to know that they had already diagnosed their child in Singapore but did not disclose this with the school. (8 September, 2022).

Collaboration with educational partners in order to share about teaching difficulties is always fruitful. Sabita was lucky that her husband was from an educational background and knew certain things about the child's behaviour and the nature of his disability. When she first heard the term autism, she had some misconceptions regarding it. She had been told it is a problem with the brain where a tumour grows and interrupts the development of neurons which impact on child's cognitive development. Her husband shared one article in Hindi and these things were mentioned in the article. She perceived autism as a cancer and thought the person with autism will die soon if they do not get proper treatment.

She further explained:

At first, I didn't know anything. I was afraid, frightened and scared when I heard or encountered autism, because I read some false medical papers where autism was described as a brain disease and I was hearing other myths about children with autism, such as, that they were psycho - but I knew deep in my heart that I can teach all children. We can train animals but these children with autism are people, so it is not an impossible task to help with their education. When I first saw an autistic child, I had doubt in myself, but later on we were able to create a bond. The boy in question grew to be very attached to me. I did not know at that time why he was not interested in making other students his friend, and one funny thing was that child literally hated our school principal - whenever he saw her coming, he just hid or closed the door. Once when the principal approached that boy asking how was he doing, he slapped the Principal and the sound of that slap was so sharp. (8 September, 2022).

When she first met a child with autism, she still had some misconceptions regarding autism; at the same time, she had some sympathy for the child but had no idea why children did not develop social skills in comparison to his peers. She was

very positive from the beginning about teaching children with special needs, but still she had no idea whether the child had autism or not.

She shared this one incident:

I remember it was a summer, and we had a swimming class, when we take our students to the regular swimming pool. The swimming instructor teaches the basic components of swimming in the baby pool for the first month of summer, and it is only after his approval that children are allowed to enter into the big pool. The big pool was nearby the baby pool. When we entered into the swimming pool premises, all the children looked excited in their swimming costumes, and there were other teachers, sisters, and swimming instructors too. The child with autism was attached to me. He did not want to hold hands of the other teachers – and then in a blink of an eye, he jumped into the big pool!

I still can't believe it - just imagine you are there holding that troublesome child's hand, but he forcedly shakes his hand free and jumps into the big pool. It was more than 6 feet deep! I almost had a heart attack, but luckily our swimming instructor was there. He immediately dived in and rescued the child, who clearly had no fear of getting drowned or getting scolded. On that day I had to carry the child the whole day. I did not even allow him to be in the baby pool, though later I came to know that he can swim quite well. It was a very tough day, at that point in time I thought that I would lose my job for being irresponsible; I was stressed the whole day, and later I called his parents and told them he jumped into the big pool They laughed and replied that he can swim well, he was trained to swim in Singapore! (8 September, 2022).

Sabita experienced hard times with the child, what with the behavioural issues, such as the big pool event, as well as trying to jump from the big slides, and running without looking at the ground. The other classmates were aware about their body posture and the threats and dangers which were in front of them; however, according to her, this child showed no fear of getting hurt. She knew the upcoming days of her teaching career will be very challenging just because of that particular child. These incidents made her more alert in terms of the child's safety.

Current Teaching Practice

She has been teaching in UKG grade at a preschool in Bhaisepati, and she has recently completed her 1-year early childhood development course from the ECEC. She got an offer to teach students for the higher grades but by that time she had developed an interest in teaching at the kindergarten level. Previously, she took a break from teaching for 2 years to deliver and then raise their child for 18 months. During this period, she took a 15 days training on teaching individuals with autism at school, provided by the Autism Care Society. She shared with me that during these 11-12 years of teaching experience, she has explored play way methods, Montessori methods, and attended various workshops and seminars regarding educating children. According to her, the changing mind-set of parents and the high competition present in the education sector, makes it vital to update one's skills with on-going educational practices. Training in specific content and delivery strategies has helped her to manage children with ASD in inclusive classes in a better way. She said:

During my initial phase, I used to teach everyone, children with and without autism, in a similar manner, but now I realize why my autistic children were not able to make little progress. Once I had attended 15 days of teacher training provided by Autism Care Nepal, my teaching approach has changed with the autistic children.

Sabita took training, did her own research and consulted with a child psychologist about making plans for teaching all the children in an inclusive regular setting; however, she shared “*For all the children we have one plan and for the autistic children we prepare other extra plans*”. The child with autism is specially nurtured with one specific teacher with more resources and a special break down in learning activity. For example, she narrated:

If we are conducting circle time, the picture of circle time has been shown, if it is a story time, the flash card of storytelling session has been shown, all students will be participating in one similar activity – however, the approach to instruction and resources that are used are different when teaching children with autism.

The changing approach in teaching has helped staff and other students of the class to have a better understanding of the children with autism. She shared that how the way other teachers used to view her teaching special needs children, the issue of bullying by other children, the complaints from parents and the specific child's

behaviour issues, used to make her feel low. She overcome these challenges through the following:

I started counselling all the students every day. I told them these children with ASD are special, they need extra care, even though they may look taller and bigger, their brain works like other children. Every day I did this, and eventually my children were mentally prepared. When the ASD children show strange or different behaviour, I heard my students commenting that he is like this because he is childish, because he is a special child, or his brain is still like that of a baby. So my students' ideas have been shaped this way. I felt delighted when I heard these things. I make the same explanation for parents and other colleagues. (13 September, 2022).

As part of her overall education programme, Sabita simultaneously started educating her colleagues, and parents as well as the students in the classroom. She focused on the awareness of the entire school to bring the improvements in the way they taught children with autism. She states that the children spend all day around people – going to the canteen to eat, play in the playground, sitting in assembly - and all this time at school, the child is facing other class members and staff, and will be sharing the premises with school friends, participating in school functions, meeting parents - so all the people involved at school, as well as the parents of all the children, should know the basic truths, ideas and information about autism, so that the autistic child is more readily accepted into regular schools.

She added:

These days, if any child with autism wants to join my class, I collect information from the parents regarding the child's nature, and then I myself do the pre-assessment of the child. I mainly focus on the functional ability of a child. When you know the child's ability, interests, strengths and weaknesses, it will help you to evaluate how the child will learn inside the regular classroom, and permits better preparation and planning. All this information helps to prepare the Individual Education Plans for the autistic student, which are essential for the child to cope with academic difficulties. (13 September, 2022).

Sabita's current teaching practice incorporates parental awareness and communication which greatly assists in understanding the child's functional skills and abilities in relation to regular class activities. Accepting a child with autism into a

regular classroom means that the child is accepted into all the aspects and in all the activities that the school, and the class teacher organizes. This is a great way to provide an opportunity to explore the world and build social and emotional connectivity with other people around the child. The individual plan is prepared here to enable continuous monitoring and see where and how the child needs support, and to keep a record of the child's learning progress and outcomes. She further narrated regarding her challenges:

Due to the sensory issues of our children with autism, I have often faced challenges such as biting and pushing. One child had the habit of pushing and pinching his friends, but I knew that he was not doing it intentionally - he was pinching others because he was seeking pressure in his fingertips, he was pushing because he wanted to acquire the sense of pressing on his palm, and as for biting, the child is seeking a jaw massage or oral massage - so one tool to help with this is using a vibrating tooth brush. These are basic issues generated from the sensory concern. I used to give lots of clay work to my child with autism, giving him flour dough. He was getting all his sensory need from that activity, and for pushing, well I gave him a heavy object to push or pull. This is helping in reducing the habit of pushing friends. But as I said we never know when and where they will perform any particular behaviour or habit. (13 September, 2022).

The challenges she is facing in her current teaching practise is to deal with these behavioural problems of a child due to a sensory issue. She shared that she is able to help and mitigate a few of their behaviours but she is still not very sure when the next behaviour and habit will arise and impact herself and her peers. She further elaborated:

I always stay positive, I know sometimes they have behavioural issues which makes me mad, but I work on maintaining my patience, and I verbally, sometimes in a pictorial form, teach these children how to behave properly in the classroom. You know, looking after one autistic student often feels the same as looking after 15 normal students! I am teaching 15 students in a class and adding 1 autistic child thus means having 30 students in a class, extra assignments, extra time, devotion, suffering, and mental ups and downs. It is all part of the journey. But between these challenges I had so many good memories and I am happy about what I am doing.

Sabita received an offer to teach children at elementary level, but her passion, dedication, and happiness derived from teaching kindergarten children has made her stay in pre-primary education. She is continuously exploring teaching ideas to support her children's needs.

Roshani: Caring Mother

Roshani was born in Ilam. She was the first child of her family which is involved in agro and farming businesses. She completed her basic level education at village level, after which her family migrated to Birtamode where she completed her higher secondary level study in a private institution.

Her parents had an inter-caste marriage which had led to a family conflict. Both parents worked and she was left in the village government school with children twice or three times her age. When she was just 4 and 5 years old, she was placed with Grade 4 children. She feels that being the first born of her family and in the company of seniors from such a young age, helped her to become responsible and independent. Even at this young age, she was able to do all the house chores and light the fire on her own. The Headmaster of that school was her mother's relative and this helped to ensure she had no problems going to school or being with the students of higher grades.

Being the youngest in the class had its advantages. She was not scolded or punished by the teacher. From a young age she wanted to be a nurse because she had heard that nurses earn lots of money and shortage of money in her family always pushed her to think about how to earn a good living. She was the first girl to take the school level examinations at the age of only 13. To get around the rule that did not allow her to take the exam before the age of 16, her parents added on 3 years to her birth certificate. She believes in lifelong learning and continues to further her education. In 2022, at the age of 42, she received a third master's degree from Tribhuvan University in Special Needs Education. She is lucky because both her parents and her spouse have always been very supportive in terms of her ongoing interest in education.

Roshani is a dedicated pre-school teacher as well as mother of two; her eldest, an accomplished daughter, is presently studying IT in an Australian university. Her son is only 8 years old, and at a very young age was diagnosed with mild autism.

Roshani, now 43 years old, worked for a while as a college lecturer but chose to work with young children instead after discovering her own child had autism. She

has taken training from various organizations regarding the education of young children, and has gathered 5 years of working experience at preschool school level, which has involved teaching autistic children in a regular classroom. Additionally, she has been trained in educating children with autism, both as a parent and as a teacher, receiving training from the Early Childhood Education Centre, the British Council and Action for Autism.

I met her at her home on a Saturday, 10 September 2022, after one of my university friends had suggested she could help with my research. Before our meeting I called her and explained the basis of my study, after which she invited me to her home. I waited in the living room for her to be free, as she was busy feeding her son who was now 8 years old. She was trying to feed him curd which is not a favourite of her son, while trying to divert her son's attention by highlighting the sound of a bird chirping near her garden. She also ran around after him, as they acted like cartoon characters and all these distractions helped her son to eat a few spoonfuls of the curd. "YEAH, YEAH, today Aavash tried 4 spoonfuls of curd, Baba", she said excitedly as she handed her son over to his father, and joined me in the living room.

We greeted each other and she told me: *Sarita ma'am, it is really hard to introduce new tastes to our autistic child and make proper toileting a habit. She said Aavash was diagnosed with autism at the age of 18 months. He is probably the first child to be diagnosed at the age of 18 months, she said. I saw he was not developing language skills properly, and showed no love for his older sister. So, we visited a child psychologist, and she said Aavash had some symptoms of autism. So, from then on life was hard.* She shared how her second born had given her pain and stress in her parenting due to the ASD.

Teaching Journey

After completing her Masters in Sociology from Delhi, Roshani started teaching in college sociology faculties at BA and MBA level from the year 2000. In between she gave birth to her daughter, but she never took a break from her career. Her husband was a campus chief in Hetauda, and her mother-in-law helped her to raise her daughter. She told me: *I came from an educated family background, and they along with my husband pushed me towards academia.* Her teaching career started after getting married and she started teaching Bachelor level students. She liked to give students notes and let them practice questions in preparation for their examination. *Teaching higher grades students was much easier because the*

classroom numbers were less, she said. She only used to have 5 to 6 regular students in her class despite a college enrolling of over 60 students.

She went on:

By teaching higher grades I gained more respect and got good pay. However, I was never satisfied with my teaching then. Most of my students were of a working age group, and because many of them worked in offices, they missed the college. I complained about the absenteeism of the students to the college authorities but they did not listen to me. They were collecting full tuition fees no matter whether students were absent or not.

According to her, teaching in higher education was a different experience, and was mainly focused on lecturing and providing notes to the students. She recalled taking the students on a field trip; she liked how the outing was not associated with any academic purpose but was more about life experience. She never had to meet student's family members to talk about the progress of a student. The students collected the exam mark sheets, and she held the role of Discipline In-charge (DI) with the job of helping keep a peaceful environment in the college. In those days, she had not taken any specific training for teaching students at higher grades and her only academic degree qualified her to be a lecturer at that time.

Teaching pre-schoolers was something new. Her eldest daughter was at a Montessori school, where she was well cared for. Roshani began understanding that in pre-school, teachers feed the students and do a lot of caring along with giving academic knowledge. She and her husband frequently visited her daughter's pre-school and had many rounds of conversations regarding how her daughter was doing at school.

As already stated, her son was diagnosed with Autism before the age of 2, and it was suggested by her friends to start teaching him at home to help develop his social and communication skills. She went to Delhi and trained in parenting a child with autism. Prior to that, she had already gathered more than 10 years of teaching experience for higher grade students. When her son was two and half years old, she decided to put him into a kindergarten. There she was not satisfied with the teaching approach and felt it didn't further her son's progress in social and communication skills, which compelled her to move him to another school which was more considerate and inclusive of a child with autism. She enrolled her son in the same school where she was about to start her career as an early childhood educator.

She explained:

I had experience teaching students who were taken higher grades and found in the higher level that students are self-motivated to learn. The pre-school was a lot different. I still remember the first day at the school. I was in a play group and the children were crying and complaining a lot. I didn't know what to do. My son was also crying and struggling in the new school environment. He would not leave my side, and later a school co-ordinator asked me to place him in another section, as he was disturbing me and throwing tantrums all the time. (10 September, 2022)

Roshani started teaching young learners at the age of 38. She had found the school where she decided to take a job and where she placed her son on the internet. It was school in the Sanepa area where the main vision was including children with special needs. She was mentored and guided in every step during her initial days of teaching at this school.

She continued:

I was a traditional teacher before I went there, where my role was the leader or superior in the class when I taught higher grades to self-motivated students, but joining kindergarten made me question my status-quo. I listened more to the students and started working on children's ideas in the class. The main problem I faced in the beginning was due to me trying to adopt a similar approach to the young children as I had adopted for the higher-class students. As a mother I was individually teaching my child at home, but teaching children of the same age in a large number was initially very tough - but I felt lucky and grateful, and was happy to be mentored and guided properly in the beginning.

Roshani shared that from her very first day at pre-school, her classroom was observed by the school co-ordinator. She was given regular feedback and on the spot guidance, which helped her learn how to run the classes smoothly. She had one child with autism in her section and her son was kept in another class with another teacher. In comparison to working with higher grades students, her stress level working with young children was much higher.

There was also the question of salary. In her post of college lecturer, per period she was earning Rs. 9,000, and monthly she used to earn more than Rs. 50,000

working at 3 different colleges. When she joined as a preschool teacher her first salary was only Rs. 15,000 per month.

Encountering Autism

Roshani shared that when her son was born, she was very happy, she narrated that at the age of 36 when her eldest daughter was already above 16, she had family pressure to give birth to a son, and in particular, there was pressure from her mother in law. She said,

I had several complications during my pregnancy and my late age to conceive the child created fear in my mind about the mental and physical wellbeing of my child. I had read many articles that woman conceiving in late age might give birth to a disabled child. When I gave birth to my son, my entire family was happy, but the happiness did not stay long.

Soon after, she observed certain behaviours which made her doubt the developmental milestones of her child. Her son, from an early age, showed poor eye contact, a poor level of responding, or looked at objects for a long time, an especially glancing to the side seemed to be common. *There was also a lack of language development.* These characteristics made her think there was something wrong with her child. Her mother-in-law kept on saying that the male child often is a late developer and did not allow her to bring her son for a check-up.

When she and her husband were in Delhi to attend one of her family member's marriages, she checked up with a child psychologist and various Doctors, and their findings declared her child had autism. At first, she and her husband were confused and went blank because they had never heard about autism before. When the psychologist said that it is lifelong disorder, both of them felt the earth shake, and their tranquil life disappeared.

She narrated:

I was lost, and devastated to learn that the bundle of joy in my arms was born with some sort of disorder and he will never be able to live a normal life. I and my husband cried, but we were taken to the counsellor's room, and a lady counsellor told us that there are early interventions to help children with autism to live happily and in a normal way. Both of us decided to stay in Delhi for 3 more months, during which we undertook Parent Child Training from the organization named Action for Autism.

Roshani took this parent child training at the one organization which was established only to advocate or create awareness amongst parents and educators while conducting research into autism. She said that she saw many children there from severe autism to mild autism. She was able to make friends there and witnessed strategies to help children with autism. Her child received speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioural therapy. The stay in Delhi was hectic, and she doesn't like to remember all the pressure and hurrying – but what she learnt there was invaluable.

In Delhi, Roshani recalled a boy named Prince, who had similar symptoms to her son, but one thing she found unique in him was that he was verbal and could communicate well. She shared that after flying back to Nepal, they enrolled their son in a nearby school where her son did not study for a year. She explained the reason she changed schools.

My son loved to do Montessori lab activities with his friends, but he had poor fine motor skills. He couldn't pour beans from one bowl to another, and from an early age he had poor hand-eye coordination. His motor skills needed to be strengthening as well as his eye hand co-ordination. I heard from his teacher that every time he took part in lab activities he created a mess, and this is clearly due to the above problems as well as his poor grip. I cried when I heard that previous school's principal forbade my son to be with other children or be in the Montessori lab. I didn't like that he was excluded from this group. (10 September, 2022)

Roshani shared that she accepted the uniqueness of children with autism but was ready to start as normal a life as possible with her son. Her son was enrolled in the new school and her son wanted to be among his peers but could not perform what he was expected to do in the school. She also mentioned how her son's teacher used to compare her son with a typically developing child who had strength in the grip and communication skills which were lacking in her son.

She decided to be a teacher herself to help her son in his educational journey. She said that as a mother she understood the pain of exclusion from a group so she never excludes a single child from the group and activity done in school. Instead, she personally helps her special needs students to socialize with peers and make friends. She recalled how she helped all her students, with and without autism, engage in classroom activities, and especially a boy named Harsh who also had autism.

She explained:

I accepted the fact that this particular child always preferred to be alone, but I engaged him and let him understand the concepts behind groups and friends. Gradually he started to work in a group. He started basic communication approaches with his peers and moved towards making friends. And later he enjoyed being in the group. My son and he were of the same age, and both had been diagnosed with mild autism, but differed in the point on the spectrum and behavioural attributes. (10 September, 2022)

Roshani elaborated that each and every child with autism is unique, and it is the adult's responsibility to find out the strengths and weaknesses of each child. With regard to the child with autism in her class, she grew to understand his unique behaviour from continuous observation. She developed her lesson plan, class activities accordingly which in result helped her student to have better communication skills and show greater socialization in the classroom.

She added:

I along with other teachers started teaching academic subjects to the children with autism in the classroom; we focused more on pre-writing, pre-reading, adjustment skills for these children in comparison to other students in the classroom. For other children without autism, they can complete such pre-standards within one month. In contrast, for each special needs student we extended the period of learning according to their learning pace.

She got the support from her colleagues to develop extra plans for specific children. She also got support from a sister, and with everybody's help, the other students in the class helped make the special needs children feel welcome and helped their teacher to give better care.

Current Teaching Practice

Roshani joined another school after the Covid outbreak of 2020. Before that she had been three years in the pre-school, in which she started her early childhood teaching career. When she joined new school, there were three children with autism already enrolled. One of the students was the principal's daughter. She said: *working in the new school was easy because people around you understand the culture of autism.* In her new school, Roshani was offered a role of overseeing teacher support, as she is a Master's graduate from TU on special needs education. Her new role has

helped her to explore more areas and enabled her to mentor other teachers in the school. Her son is also studying in same school in grade 2. In her own words:

Education is a basic right for all children, and we should create an inclusive environment at school. Should we not equip our teachers to teach these beautiful souls? Teachers should know what autism is, and be able to set up the class, following best practises, for autistic children. Professional development and teacher training benefits are essential and greatly help when teaching a child with autism. Only a trained teacher can prepare for and be able to implement an autism specific intervention in a regular classroom. (10 September, 2022)

Roshani stressed the importance of training in terms of making the classroom more inclusive. She continues to share her knowledge with other novice teachers creating awareness about autism. She went on:

I used to hear teachers, and sisters labelling the child as Badmash Baccha, or mentally retarded baccha, (a child with psychiatric problem). These were common tags used for a child with autism. The main problem I encountered with autistic children has to do with communication, as a child with autism cannot socialize like other children, and so finds it hard to participate in group play activities. Mostly I noticed the child with autism preferred to be alone and playing with him or herself. But nothing is impossible - being a mother of an autistic child, my first preference is a regular school, but as a teacher and a mother, should I not be able to handle these children, and have an idea as to what are the further academic goals and activities that the child should be learning or aiming towards? Our children with autism need extra effort, and the teachers who are teaching children with ASD needs to be enthusiastic, energetic and open minded for the latest advances and updates. They need to know that such things as voice modulation, gesture and body posture are important when we teach a child with ASD. (10 September, 2022).

She added that societal myths, unwelcome tags, and a lack of understanding towards autism can create boundaries inside and outside the classroom, as even in an inclusive setting, labelling students often excludes those students from a group. To avoid this potential for exclusion, the teacher needs to have certain qualities within the regular classroom. Most of the time, children with autism are often excluded currently from group work but according to Roshani including students, letting them participate

in every activity actually helps the student's holistic development. In early childhood development, all children, not just those with special needs, require support around developing social skills and communication skills. Roshani elaborated that teachers need to understand the complexity of each child and be aware of good techniques. She further narrated:

Autism is a lifelong condition, although mostly I am focusing on developing the skills of young special needs children, no matter how much support they need. There was one girl whose her parents never accepted the fact that their child is autistic. They wanted their child to reach high academic levels. Her parents remain in a state of denial, despite the fact that they have already consulted with the doctors and undertaken the ADOS (the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule), and the reports clearly show that their child is autistic and at a severe level. The role of a family plays a great role in nurturing such a child with ASD – but first, acceptance by the parents is crucial. To see the child progress as best as possible, there is a need for a close collaboration between teacher, parents and school management. All three working together, in a positive way, is a must. This way basic information such as how a child spends time at home and at school can be shared. All of us should know what is happening in such a child's life. This way teachers can deal with any challenges collaboratively and in shared environment. Sadly, in the case of this girl, her father just took out his child from our school and enrolled her in another school. Without the parent's acceptance and support wherever they go, the child will not receive the help she really needs. (10 September, 2022).

Roshani admitted this case was difficult for her to witness. The parent's expectations for their child need to be realistic, and although it is understandable they want their daughter to be academically bright, such unattainable wishes cause a lot of frustration for the teacher and child.

She continued:

At the moment, I am focusing on the extracurricular activities of all children. I often engage all my students in pottery, where the student's tactile and motor skills are enhanced. Our students make such things as pencil holders. One child with autism made random long shaped clay modules and asked me to write on it, which made me so happy. I could see through this gesture that the special needs child had made his own pencil. It is important to foster creativity

in our students. Likewise, I never exclude any students when going on a school field visit. Exposure to the outside world offers opportunities, especially to the child with autism, to learn more about his or her world. It also teaches them to be more independent, and walking in a line, and following other friends provides and enhances social and communication skills too. (10 September, 2022).

Roshani is happy to include all students in every activity. She is the Lead Teacher of her UKG and has 2 children with autism in her class. She says she has enough support from an assistant teachers and classroom helper to make the classroom more inclusive.

She added:

The bonding between teacher and student is very necessary when we try to educate special children. If you cannot create a good bond, the child will not want to learn from you, and without basic understanding about autism in regular school teachers it is difficult to make the classroom more participatory. Autistic child mostly love to stay alone, run outside, or do certain repetitive tasks which is very uncommon for other students. According to the normal child teacher ratio in regular schools, you can see that there are more than 15 students in my current UKG class, which is supported by one care taker and two assistant teachers. Yet a child with ASD needs individual care and individual tuition. I am lucky enough to have been provide with sufficient trained human resources around me to support the children with special needs. (10 September 2022).

She insisted it was only with the help of other staff members in the school that she is able to teach autistic children in a regular classroom, due to the much needed extra support from a care giver to assist with improving academic progress and social skills. She talked about her challenges and shared how she is coping with it:

There are some behaviour issues that I have encountered in my classroom that have been difficult. There is one boy, in particular, whose behaviour issues are ongoing. I try to explore the reasons behind the behaviour, and I prepare myself for it in differing ways, by figuring out avenues to manage certain situations or trying to find ways to communicate with the difficult child by using techniques to maintain eye contact, using the shadow teacher approach to help the child socialize more appropriately. I ignore this child's disruptive

behaviour and try to engage him in another task, and I focus more on his good behaviours by praising frequently. I know he loves praise and reinforcement. For disruptive behaviour, as stated, I ignore or divert the child's attention, without any facial expression or any specific negative gesture or interaction. To know these small things is very important for me to handle such a child with autism in my current practice. (10 September, 2022).

The behaviour issue she is facing in her regular classroom has been largely resolved by following such techniques, although Roshani admits that such techniques may not suit every child, and approaches need to be varied depending on the characteristics of each unique child. She added that the boy showing behaviour issue in the class is often doing it to seek the teacher's attention. He loves verbal appreciation and Roshani is often able to resolve the child's behaviour issues by complimenting him. However, this approach may not work for others.

Roshani concluded by repeating that although all students are unique, when educating students with ASD in a regular classroom, there are certain skills that are universal. She strongly reiterates that the role of the parents is crucial, and including the parents as much as possible is essential. She also repeated the importance of support from other staff members and school management - but above all, it begins with the preparedness and willingness of the teacher who is attempting to teach an autistic student in a regular class.

Parbati: Dedicated Human Being

My fifth participant, Ms. Parbati, is also a kindergarten teacher, and I met her through one of my friends at the Kathmandu University. She is originally from Butwal, completed her higher secondary level schooling from a community school in Butwal, and is now living in Sitapaila with her family. She is the mother of a 7 year old son and has more than 2 years of teaching experience as a shadow teacher in kindergarten. Until today, she has not received any formal training in teaching children with autism in a regular classroom setting, although she has learnt a lot about the area through her school's in house teacher training approach.

She is the youngest daughter of her family, which is from a marginalised background, and according to her best estimate, she is the only female from her locality to complete a high school education. Her husband runs a small silver jewellery business. She used to look after the accounts for her husband's business but she moved into teaching after she was asked if she would be a shadow teacher of a

child with autism for 3 to 4 hours each day. Since accepting the position, she has developed a keen interest in teaching and in autism.

It was Friday, 9 September 2022 when I went to meet her at her school in Syuchatar, and we initially sat together in the school playground. I explained to her about my research and outlined the purpose behind my research in detail. She requested me to sit with her in her classroom and I agreed to do so. Her classroom was beautifully decorated; all the walls were covered with the letters of the alphabet, number lines, birthday charts, reward charts, all kinds of mathematical shapes and a whole lot more. Her classroom had a lot of space. We met one teacher whom she is working under, who was in the classroom preparing for tomorrow's classwork, and she politely allowed both of us to look around the classroom. There was a corner set for reading activities and one round table at the back of the class, where pictures drawn by the students were laid out. Parbati requested me to sit beside her at the round table and we continued our discussion. She was excited to see me and surprised at the same time that her voice could be of any significance in such an academic work. I again explained the importance of hearing different voices of those involved in teaching children with autism and asked her to begin by recapping on her journey into teaching.

Teaching Journey

Parbati started teaching in 2019, and as already stated, before that she used to help her husband in their family business. She recalled how her son was having difficulties with his homework and she could not solve the mathematical problems in his book; she had to ask for help from her landlady to teach the maths to her son! Later her landlady requested Parbati to be a personal teacher for the son of her cousin brother. Parbati was not doing anything at the time as the business of her husband was on the decline and she was spending her hours at home doing house chores. When the land lady approached her she was surprised by the offer, and could not believe that she was being offered the job of a shadow teacher because she believed that her English was too poor to be working in a school in Kathmandu. She said:

I was a housewife who could not read and write properly in English. Yes, years before I had completed my higher level schooling but in the 9-10 years that followed I hadn't touched a book, nor participated in any academic forum. As you know the schooling I received from a government school meant I was not taught through the medium of English. After marriage my husband

had not allowed me to work outside, but this time fortunately, he let me work in the school.

Parbati explained that throughout her life she had many restrictions in her childhood and after she married. The economic crisis in her own family and being a mother, but with no previous teaching experience, unexpectedly evolved into a new career opportunity. Up until then, her main responsibilities were to look after her son and help him in completing his homework at home, and the household chores. She was happy she was able to give enough time to her son from the day he was born, and it was during these mother and son transactions that her teaching and learning skills began. Looking after her new born child and nurturing him was something she very much enjoyed.

As far as she was concerned, her teaching journey started the day her son was born, and along with her two brothers in law and one sister in law, the team effort of helping her son with his homework was a kind of informal teacher training. She lives in a joint family, among her relatives, in a rented apartment at Sitapaila. Though poor in English, she is excellent in the Nepali language and she hopes to pass the Lok Sewa exam (Public Service Commission Job Exam) in the near future.

For her, the job of educating children has encouraged her to keep learning herself. In the process of educating children, we are all the time encouraging the young children to do what they want to do and to follow their goals and dreams. She explained that all children, whether they are or are not attending school, are all the time acquiring knowledge and skills: *for me teaching means helping children to acquire more and more skills and I call that skill "encouragement" if you encourage your children they can do better, isn't it Sarita, Maam?"* she said. Parbati developed new perspectives on teaching children; she does not emphasize big educational philosophies but instead simplified the meaning and purpose of educating children to just creating an environment that helps the children to grow more and more.

In her own words, she explained:

When I was first approached about the job of being a teacher, I was scared because I believed that I did not have the qualities or skills to be a teacher, but both my brother in laws, who were working in Malaysia in those days, supported me. Their support gave me the encouragement I needed to give it a try. I remember when I first met the child for whom I was hired to shadow. Both parents told me to feed

that child, be in school with him and told me to help the child with toileting. That's it. That's all they said. They gave me no more instructions. I had to learn for myself what I needed to do. At first I showed hesitation, and doubted my ability to do the teaching job. However, after meeting with the child and helping the child in school for a while, I became more comfortable and changed my whole perspective on my capabilities and my ability to work within a school environment. (9 September, 2022)

She went on:

When I visited my son's school I found that teachers were only speaking in English. They were beautifully dressed and seemed to have high class personalities. Most of the teachers looked so smart. I felt so small in comparison. I looked at myself, my hair was curly, I was not allowed to wear comfortable pants and I felt I did not look good. I did not see how I could fit in to a school environment like this but I was completely wrong. (9 September, 2022).

She misunderstood the school environment, the child friendly environment and how a person like her, who helps with the nurturing of a child or children, is could fit in and become a part of the essence of the school system. The boy whom she was looking after was a grandchild of one of the board members in the school. She received a lot of support from the school staff and fellow colleagues and this helped immensely.

She further narrated:

My first day was interesting. Before school started I went to the child's home first and we were driven to the school in a private vehicle. I noticed the child I was hired to mind, who we will call Binod (a pseudo name) was muttering something. I asked him what he had had for breakfast but he did not respond. He was 5 years old then, and when I tried to hold his hand he pulled away. He seemed to show little interest in anything, and he did not notice the balloon in my hand. At school, I and the boy were kindly directed to the classroom by a lady named Ms Samita. I saw Binod's picture on the bag hanger, and before I said something, he put his bag on the hanger, took out his shoes and placed his water bottle in the corner. I was happy to meet the child and liked his good manners. Although I noticed there were some unusual behaviours, I was

happy that the child seemed to be in a good mood, and I was happy to help him whatever way I could. (9 September 2022).

Parbati noticed from the start the difference between the child with autism she had to shadow and the other students. Even their positioning in the class room was different. She explained:

During the class time, I think, there were about 12 students and one teacher and Binod was placed apart from the other children, and near the teacher, with the other students further away. The student's desks and benches were facing towards a whiteboard at the front of the room and to the right of it there was the teacher and Binod's place. On the first day, the class teacher introduced me as 'a new teacher' to the class and I helped the class teacher in giving out worksheets, and assisting children with their class work. The class teacher maam asked me specially to help Binod complete his classwork. I still remember my surprise at how he was biting all his pencils and chewing them. He seemed not to be focused on the class activities. He was given English classwork to do, and had to identify "a" and "an" in different pictures. I taught him about vowel sound from the start, as the class teacher maam had given me flash cards of vowel sounds and pictures with the words "a" and "an". Binod did not want to write so we did reading activities instead on that first day. I felt the other children were doing their classwork without the teacher's support but that Binod needed a lot more assistance. And this was how it continued. (9 September 2022).

Parbati's first day of teaching was memorable. From the start, she was helping other teachers in the classroom and was aware of certain teaching techniques being used. She was highly influenced by the teacher who helped her deal with the child who was not interested in writing. She felt that trying different approaches was important to help the learner and was impressed with this child first approach. It was not about one rigid way of teaching but about finding an approach that suited the individual child. Binod showed a disinterest in writing and immediately the teacher changed the approach to a pictorial activity for him, whereas the other students continued with the reading exercise. This flexibility helped Binod to learn in a different way and kept the autistic child focused and enabled her to enjoy the lesson.

Parbati continued:

That first day began a memorable teaching journey, and all along the way, I got full support from the class teacher on what to do. The lesson plans were made by another teacher as was the classwork and homework. So my full focus was on looking after Binod. Sometimes when Jyoti maam (lead teacher) was absent, I was able to follow her lesson plan. After 3 months of employment at the school, Binod went to Canada - and then the School Principal made me the Nepali language teacher for the entire pre-school, even though before that grade teachers were responsible for teaching the Nepali subject.

She shared that she was happy to follow the main teacher's footprints when teaching young children in the beginning as she had no previous teaching experience nor a degree in education. But the unexpected, sudden migration of the child to Canada with his parents made her role in the school obsolete until she was handed this other responsibility as the Nepali language teacher for the entire pre-school block.

Encountering Autism

Parbati started her educational career as this shadow teacher, looking after the child, whom we have named as Binod, but it is interesting that from the outset his parents never told her that he was autistic. *I came to know this fact from his grandfather. Binod's parents never wanted me to talk about it, nor did they want others to talk about their child having autism.* In our Nepalese context, it is clear that some people still do not want to talk about autism in society, or admit to their child having autism due to the social stigma. Due to our societal perspectives and negative attitude towards person with disabilities or any disorder, people do not want to openly talk about the issue or be open about a person with a disability in the community. This prevents understanding, provision and best practise. The negative attitude of people towards children with special needs, and towards a special needs child getting educated, is a serious barrier to their education, and this is still prevalent in the Nepali context (Banks et. al., 2019). This negative attitude that still prevails towards those children with autism, clearly had something to do with Binod's parents not disclosing the condition of their own child to the one who was responsible for teaching him.

In Parbati's own words:

If I had known about Binod's disorder previously, I too would have begun with so many false assumptions about him, but I came to know about his autism

later although I had noticed straight away that he was different from other children in classroom. But thank God! I was not told he was autistic beforehand, because I might have treated him differently.

Parbati shared that in her community, people often consider any sort of disorder as due to the consequence of the last birth (karma), and disabilities, especially mental, autism and intellectual disabilities are perceived and viewed as someone who is a maniac or crazy. According to her, if she had known about his disorder previously, her pre-assumptions and perceptions would have most likely hindered her teaching practice, and would have affected the way she handled Binod.

She went on:

When I and other school staff were at a school annual picnic, one teacher mentioned the word autistic. We were playing a hot potato game, and at first I was the one who was out of the game, when suddenly the other teacher sarcastically said अटिसटिक बच्चा हेर्दा हेर्दै आफै अटिसटिक हुनुभएछ (You have become autistic yourself by staying and dealing with an autistic child). I noticed when the teacher made this comment Jyoti maam was trying to shut her up. But at this stage, I was still unaware of Binod's condition - I was innocent and did not understand her clue. It was not until the next day when I came to the classroom, and only after my request, that Jyoti maam revealed that Binod was a child with autism, and at the same time she forbid me to share this with anyone. I was scared by this information. I thought autism was a disease like AIDs. I asked Jyoti maam "is autism a communicable disease?" She shut me down and smiled and we did not talk any further on the subject on that day. (11 September 2022).

Parbati was teaching a child with autism but only was made aware of this about 3 months after she began. In her school nobody was openly talking and sharing information about autism. She was often humiliated by other teachers and named as Autistic Maam. She was concerned and scared. The issue was surrounded by preconceptions, suspicion and secrecy. Despite her concerns she herself was reluctant to ask anything about autism.

She continued:

I went to my landlord, and asked her about aAutism. She suggested I watch a movie that she believed would help me to understand autism. I watched the

Hindi version of “Good Doctors” and the characters Khan, Pablo, and little Man Tate, better helped me to understand the condition. I did not get proper information from my colleagues or from any academic courses or training at that time. There were so many things on the subject available on the internet but it was all in English, so watching the movie recommended to me as well as a few documentaries in Hindi was the only way I came to know about autism. I realised that Autism is a spectrum, and that it is not something to be frightened of, and that the autistic spectrum was common in all societies. (11 September 2022).

Parbati’s easy access to the internet opened the door for exploring more about the conditions and helped her to learn about autism in her initial days. Despite her difficulty with the English language, she explored the internet and watched several movies with her husband, and slowly grew to develop a more accurate and positive perspective on autism. She felt bad when she was tagged as “Autistic maam” but she was satisfied at how she had tried to help and endeavoured to treat Binod well during her time as his teacher, before his brief three months with her were finished.

She further narrated:

I was assigned as a Nepali Language teacher when Binod went to Canada with his parents. Binod returned from Canada with his parents who, on their return, called me to their home and spoke of some therapy they had looked into called stem cell therapy. They asked me to once again look after Binod now that he had returned to Nepal. It was intended he would upgrade to Grade 1 and I would look after him there, but instead he repeated his UKG as he had to undergo the therapy and take certain medication. Along with Binod, I was also asked to supervise another child Pearl, who was also diagnosed with mild autism. Pearl already had super reading skills. I worked on her reading skills and helped her to continue her progress and harness her existing skills. I also taught her skills connected to making friends or being in a group; mostly I focused on teaching her these new skills and helping her to have good behaviour. (11 September 2022).

Parbati was surprised by the fact, that although she was looking after another child who had autism, the second child, Pearl, was so different to Binod. Her female student had no problem in reading books, and could even read the newspaper; as her shadow teacher a lot of the time was spent harnessing the skills she already had, thus

strengthening her strengths. Parbati learned how true it is to refer to autism as a spectrum because each person diagnosed with the conditions has a diversity of signs and symptoms, and abilities. Both of her children were labelled as having mild autism but they were surprisingly different. Parbati enjoyed trying to tailor her approach to suit her children and enjoyed the challenge of supporting their different abilities and needs inside the classroom. She stayed there for one year, working in this capacity before moving to Maitidevi, where her husband's jewellery shop was shifted, and though the School Director called her to work in a previous school she had been familiar with, she joined another school as UKG grade teacher in Gyaneshor. She shared that she was offered good pay there and due to financial difficulties in her family, she agreed to work in this new school with her husband's support.

Just after shifting to the new area, Parbati saw a vacancy for a teacher in a Facebook post, applied for the UKG grade teacher position, was selected and started teaching in her new school in 2020. Her family was dealing with a severe financial crisis due to the Covid lockdown. For few months she taught the children via Zoom, the online platform commonly used for meetings, teaching and learning. She was told by the Principal that there was one student with autism in her online class. This boy attended 2 to 3 weeks of the online classes but then discontinued. The Principal explained that this boy with autism was not interested in being part of the virtual class during this the second lockdown period; he only attended sessions for 2 to 3 weeks and could not sit calmly in front of his mobile. The Principal elaborated on the difficulties the child with autism was having since teaching had become on line. She said the boy with autism rarely attends, could not stay still and did not respond to questions and queries, and according to the child's mother, he just wanted to play games and watched YouTube videos. The mother stated that as well as autism, her son also had ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) and as a result was unable to sit still or handle the online class. ADHD is another neurodevelopmental disorder, and children diagnosed with it often have problems with concentration, focusing and sitting quietly. There is a high chance of ADHD among those diagnosed with autism (Taurines et al., 2012). Parbati learned that autism was a complex condition and that without a proper plan and strategy, tailored to suit the needs of the particular child with autism, the classroom situation would be less optimal than it could be.

Current Teaching Practice

Parbati is currently working back in the same school where she started her teaching career, as due to the Covid-19 pandemic, she had to discontinue her job in the Gyaneshor school. At the moment she is the shadow teacher of 3 students with autism in the same school where she once helped Binod. When she was asked to return to this school, she opened up and shared all the difficulties, troubles and humiliations she faced from other teachers when she used to shadow teach Binod. She was counselled that this could not be allowed to continue and told she would not bear such humiliations going forward. And after receiving such assurances she agreed to return to the previous school. Looking after three autistic children has been rewarding, but also, at times very difficult. She narrated:

At the moment, I am a shadow teacher, specially hired to look after 3 children with special needs, who we will call Ryan, Rudrakxa and Aayan. The three of them can be very moody, and easily become hyper. The behaviour of Rudrakxa is very difficult; if he needs something and doesn't get it, he keeps on crying. Ryan is very sensitive and does not listen when he is told he cannot do something. He doesn't seem to hear the word 'NO'. If he is doing something bad in the classroom and I tell him not to do it, he is most likely going to hit you. The other boy Aayan is an attention seeker. He seeks affection, love and compassion. If I do not give him enough attention he bites or pushes the others. (15 September 2022).

Parbati is teaching in a UKG grade of a regular school, and her previous experience of looking after Binod and Pearl have enabled her to now manage 3 children with autism. She finds once again, however, that the needs and characteristics of these three children are completely different. In her UKG classroom there are a total 18 students, including the three with special needs. The class teacher looks after the other students whereas she is there to look after the 3 children with autism and to give them personalized care, academic support and also help them to learn some social skills. The role of the shadow teacher on nurturing the special needs children in a regular classroom setting is mainly about providing support when and where it is needed by the child along with teaching new skills (Hamid et. al., 2020). With regard to her current practices she explained:

I am the shadow teacher, there to support the lead teacher in the class. I did not know the meaning of shadow teacher in the beginning but understood

its major roles and responsibility. Although all the students are in the same room, you will find that the classwork we set for the three autistic children is very different due to their individual learning pace and different abilities. Often the child with autism is slower and so they have no pressure to cover the full course but they still get enrolled in grade 1. When it is exam time, Ryan and Aayan attempt the same question paper as the other students; however, as regards Rudrakxa his parents have told us not to place any academic burden on his shoulders so we just mark his continuous progress report card. For Rudrakxa, I introduce only one concept per day, thus if he is learning counting, only math is introduced. If he is learning Nepali, again no other subject is introduced that day. It is really difficult - it is hard to work at a pace that suits the particular need. When teaching autistic students inside the classroom, you often feel like you are not the boss; the child tells you what to do, and they do not obey if they do not feel like it; for example, on some days they may not like to be ordered to read and write, and they don't! (15 September 2022).

The three students participate in various activities and their teachers helped them academically as well as trying to help them make good bonds with other students. The lessons to be taught are prepared initially, and Parbati knows the way you give your instructions does matter to her children with ASD. Two of her students in the group of three do similar class activities as the other students and participate in similar assessments, whereas, as stated, one of the three has his assessments and academic goals more personally tailored. Keeping them motivated is a daily challenge, as she explained:

'Look at this' (while showing a drawer which contain packets of cheese balls and marshmallows). In other words, I have to reward their participation. I have to pamper each and every child - every time I have to pamper them by saying please do this and I will give this to you. Sometimes, this involves rewards that involve going to the canteen, or going to the playground. Part of teaching autistic students is learning what rewards work with each individual student. Aayan doesn't like to go out but is fond of cheese balls, so every time I want him to do some learning, or work I have to say "let's do it and I will give you cheese balls". For Rudrakxa, doing writing activity is so hard, and he does not like to produce words even though he can, so a gift of a marshmallow is kind of reinforcement for him. He can be motivated if you promise

him a marshmallow after his work. Food as a reinforcement can also bring good results and encourage them to do or behave in a way you want them to. (15 September 2022).

This reinforcement approach to help children learn something or to perform something through conditioning is the traditional approach of behaviourism. Parbati used food every time her students' finished their classwork or to do any desired activity she wanted them to do. She was excited about the positive results and shared how all three of her autistic students were neuro-atypical children and as such, they were more likely to repeat the response if there is conditioning frequently and this repetitive conditioning helps them establish certain habits. It was easy for Parbati to identify the actual appropriate reinforcement for her children, and with the help of their parents she was able to figure out what to use and when to use reinforcements for her students. Egel (1980) and (1981) established the primary reinforcement of food to be effective to motivate students in educational settings. Parbati has been able to get desirable outcomes with the children following this approach.

She added:

Aayan does not wear slippers or shoes, and he never wears socks. His parents and I are doing everything we can to try and understand why wearing shoes and socks is so irritating for him. Another unusual thing about him is how normally we sit on a toilet commode, right? But he stands on the commode for both, pee and poo. He doesn't like to sit on a toilet pan. I think he has some problem with touching things or how certain things feel. I asked his parents to consult with the doctor about this. The last time he took off his socks and shoes, I told him I am throwing shoes and socks away as he doesn't need them: when I said these words he immediately came and wore those shoes again..... but after sometime, he again took off his shoes and hid them somewhere. It was very difficult for me to find out where he put those shoes.!He has already lost five or six pairs of shoes, maam! Thank God his parents are so understanding they never complained. (15 September 2022).

Parbati is all the time learning about the different behaviours of her autistic students. She is trying to allow for some and endeavouring to change other behaviours. She states that working with the parents, and having their support is essential.

She further narrated:

One, The boy named Grace who joined last month also has a touch problem. He does not like to have his nails or his hair cut. His parents told me he has problems with his nerves. They went for therapy, and it involved social stories or a picture book on how to cut hair and nails, using real pictures.

Pabati is working all the time on problems relating to sensory issues with her children, in the school. They spend the whole day sitting and doing activities, and she is aware that certain textures, or certain touches, as well as aspects of maintaining personal hygiene might be uncomfortable for a child with ASD. Sensory issues are more prevalent among children with ASD and rates for pre-school aged children is higher, according to Baranek et. al., (2006) and Watling et. al. (2001). The approach of using social stories to make child friendlier towards or more likely to adjust to their sensory issue along with therapy, has been a great help for students, especially for Grace.

She went on:

Maam, there are three children in my class, all of them are of the same age group, and yet still autism remains a mystery for many. I am not allowed to ask or share my difficulties to other teachers. Most of the parents are themselves not aware of it, and acceptance regarding autism is far from the reality. The students with autism, like my three, are physically included in the class room, but I feel, in many ways they are still excluded. They hardly participate in any group work with other students or in any group celebration, project work, dance, or music involving the other students. They just go there and sit for a while and wait in their own place while these activities are going on. I am not sure how can I make my classroom more inclusive. I do not have an educational degree nor any special training. (15 September 2022).

Parbati described her current status in terms of communicating and collaborating with other colleagues in the school as less than ideal. She is not allowed to talk and discuss much about autism and the problems with the children due to privacy concerns of the child. In her school, there is no mentor to guide her, and she has had to use the internet and movies to help her prepare specific activities for her three children. Debunking myths related to autism is essential. The sooner it is no longer stigmatised the better it will be for everyone – the children, the teachers, the parents and the schools. When people can talk freely about their autistic son or

daughter, then greater understanding will lead to much improved progress. Parbati shared how she is able to bond emotionally with her children now:

Initially I did not know anything about autism, but nowadays through my own efforts I have a better understanding of what it is, and I feel love for them. When I help them, I feel an inner peace. If I get upset or feel annoyed, yes, sometimes I shout at these children, but I cannot tolerate other colleagues saying any bad things about these children. I feel bad if I hear anyone say something bad about them. Even though there are dozens of complaints and a lot of restrictions, I keep on loving them.

She elaborated how developing this emotional fondness for her students has helped her to develop their skills and remain positive throughout the day. Her current practice, as stated involves many restrictions, and she concludes that her autistic three children are excluded from many activities - however she is able to engage her students in many other academic and developmental activities inside the classroom.

Stepping into Inclusive Educational Practices

I have explored the current practise of five teachers involved in teaching autistic students in mainstream schools. Each one is trying to promote more inclusivity for a child with autism in these regular schools, and all five participants initially had different perceptions regarding Autism.

Ajita viewed it negatively and considered it to be a mental illness and dehumanising when she encountered it in her teaching journey. Eventually and with the help of her new School Principals' assistance, she changed her perception about autism. She sees it now as a complex special need, and promotes an inclusive environment in her class and family home partnership in the autistic child's learning.

Archana couldn't understand autism in the beginning, but she was happy her child's parents could afford a personal shadow teacher for their child to ease his difficulties at school. Like Ajita, she received a lot of misinformation about the condition and incomplete information about the autistic child she had to look after. At present she is teaching in a regular classroom where there are two children with autism. She shared that for her at school promoting inclusive education has many aspects. It involves not only including the child physically in the classroom with their age appropriate peers, but also providing a safe environment. She explained that focusing on their safety and security is a priority, as the children with autism often get

bullied by their peers, or from people around them due to their poor communication skills.

My third participant Sabita also began with false ideas and myths about autism, despite coming from an educated family. The resources she gathered from the internet were not very helpful to understand autism, and she even came across a few articles where autism was described as a brain disease. At the moment she has 2 children with autism in her regular classroom. She said that the role of the rest of the students in her class is to accept the child with autism. She considers this to be the first necessary step towards inclusivity, because a child with ASD spends a lot of time with peers, and it is important that she or he is made to feel welcome if the child with ASD is to get better results and perform better in regular school activities.

The fourth participant Roshani had a different experience concerning the condition, because she is mother of an autistic child. Her son was diagnosed earlier with lots of ASD symptoms, and her journey towards acceptance and diagnosis as well as in the educating process was filled with lots of ups and downs. She quit her high paying job to educate her son because her son was not being included in regular classroom activities. She now has three children with autism in her regular classroom and feels mislabelling a child with ASD with such humiliating tags as Pagal, Badmash, or Khuskeko (psycho) is a barrier to that child's progress and inclusivity in the regular classroom.

My fifth participant Parbati experienced humiliation from her own colleagues. She also received many false ideas about the condition and received insults because of her involvement in trying to educate the child with autism. She was named as "Autistic Maam" and often criticized for being a teacher of a child with special needs. She received no information about the autistic child and was left in the dark. Three months passed before she even found out that the child she taught had been diagnosed autistic. There is clearly a great need for much better openness and transparency on autism, so that we can know the autistic child earlier and better, and provide much more constructive assistance. As well as transparency and greater communication about the condition, there is also a need for much more and better training. It is unacceptable that Parbati had to learn about autism from a Hindi movie, and about strategies to teach autistic students from the internet.

Thankfully in the world of education, the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream classroom is increasing due to the increasing rights of the child with

special needs. Inclusion has become more of a buzz word for parents as they try to help their autistic child fulfil his or her right to education despite their disability. This progressive trend allows teachers to welcome more children with autism into the regular classroom. The stories of my five participants and their teaching journey, provides not only examples of the progress that is being made, but also of the remaining challenges. They all moved from a position of ignorance, to a greater awareness of the condition, and a greater capacity to help children with autism. They saw how the myths, misinformation and secrecy surrounding autism only further disadvantaged the child. Their stories are part of the move towards better understanding, better practise and greater inclusivity in schools regarding autism.

Reflecting through Theoretical Perspective

All of those who participated in this research valued their occupations and promoted teaching in an inclusive setting. They saw making schools more autistic child friendly as an important, reputable and respectable goal. They all enjoyed the work they did with their autistic students, and recognised the movement towards inclusivity that they were part of, despite the immense difficulties they faced. They were challenged at every turn, sometimes by the school management, sometimes by the staff or parents, and sometimes by the public at large. Teaching autistic children can be very testing, as seen by the examples of hitting, or crying, outlined above when an autistic child didn't get his way. Also there were problems trying to keep shoes on, or toilet training, or helping the autistic child fit in to a group. Yet all of the participants were self-motivated to teach children with special needs, and they exhibited an emotional attachment to the child with special needs, as well as feelings of happiness and inner satisfaction. The positive emotional attachment between the autistic student and the teacher is clearly one of the essential aspects when it comes to helping development and education in autistic children. Encouragingly, those interviewed spoke about the positive support they received from the school authorities and some of the parents; this too is essential if a teacher is going to be able to persevere in this field and remain in the teaching profession.

The hunger for knowledge about autism that all five participants revealed, was also illuminating. It was this hunger for information that had some spending hours on research that led to important self-learning, and helped with the debunking of false information and social myths. Even this determination to find the truth shows how revolutionary our teachers can be. There is a saying - "if a child cannot learn in the

way we teach, we must teach in a way the child can learn” – which is very relevant when it comes to teaching the child with autism. We saw how Parbati realised all the children she encountered with autism were different, thus lesson plans and programmes that suit each individual ASD student are essential. We cannot teach all children the same, and so we have to move towards teaching in a way that suits the individual student. Even, the rewards we use must be tailor-made. As Parbati explained some preferred food rewards, while others wanted a trip to the playgroud. Every human being on this planet is unique and has her or his own tastes and capabilities. The way each of us perceives the world and learns is unique and different from one to the other. We cannot use a one size fits all principle, especially now that autistic students are appearing more and more in regular classrooms. As a teacher, I have experienced the need for individual learning strategies as students came from diverse backgrounds. The necessity to address everyone’s needs and celebrate their individuality is very important.

All of the participants spoke about the need to see that all the students with autism are warmly welcomed into the regular school, but they also highlighted the need for good educational leadership and proper human resources to look after the autistic children, as well as the need for dedicated school space and basic facilities, and someone to provide mentorship for the teachers who are new to the field.

The five participants are from various educational backgrounds, and had different outlooks and different experiences - yet they shared the common ground of accepting the importance of more and more schools welcoming autistic students into their regular classrooms.

Education is important and is a basic right for all human beings, and sometimes I have questioned myself why the right to participate in educational scenario is often violated due to someone’s disability. With the help of enlightened education, we can help children with autism improve their quality of life despite their gender, ethnicity or disability, and it is time everyone at all levels helped to make such inclusion more acceptable. Why are we still reluctant to accept certain disabilities in our schools or social contexts? As Pārbati shared, she is not allowed to talk about autism with her friends or with the parents. This secrecy and stigmatism has to stop. Why are we still reluctant to share and accept the reality and symptoms of autism? Clearly, it is because we have allowed a negative perspective on the condition

to continue. For too long, disabilities have been seen and viewed as something shameful, and defaming of the family status.

I want to see a world where everyone is welcomed and life is made as easy on others as possible, a world where an autistic child is not disadvantaged by myths and uneducated views, but rather helped and enabled, and above all, a world where acceptance of each individual's uniqueness is central. We all are imperfect and we all deserve help to become our best selves. There is a fault in every living person - is it not better to focus more on the positive aspects and potential of each individual?

The participants' narratives touch on all three theories I mentioned for this study related to inclusive education, autism, and social constructivism. In terms of inclusive education, the narratives highlight the importance of creating inclusive school environments that welcome students with autism into regular classrooms (Hornby, 2014). This aligns with the theory of inclusive education, which argues that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, should have equal access to education in a mainstream setting. Some of my participants highlighted the importance of individualising teaching strategies and rewards for students with autism, as well as the need for good educational leadership and resources to support their education. These strategies align with the theory of autism, which emphasizes the importance of addressing the unique needs and strengths of each individual with autism (Salend, 2011).

Finally, the narratives also highlight the importance of emotional attachment between teachers and students with autism, as well as the need for individualized lesson plans and programmes that suit the individual needs and capabilities of each student. These ideas align with the theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes the importance of creating social and collaborative learning environments that take into account the unique needs and perspectives of each learner (Vyogotsky, 2012).

CHAPTER V

PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF INCLUSION AMONG TEACHERS IN THE REGULAR CLASSROOM

In the previous chapter, I explored and critically analysed my research participants' teaching journeys, their perceptions on autism, and their current teaching practices. I concluded by explaining how their current practice is helping regular school to promote more inclusivity for children with special needs.

This chapter addresses the second research question: How do teachers perceive and practice inclusion in the regular classroom? Here, I have gathered narratives on the perception of my participants regarding an inclusive environment. I explored the insights and beliefs of my research participants, and all five participants have provided and shared their perception and insights on inclusion.

Unfolding Stories on Inclusion

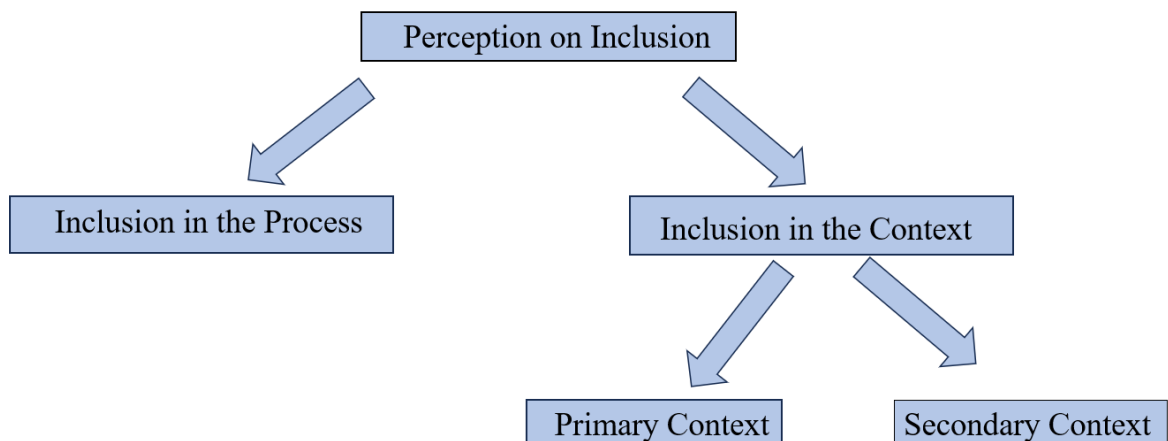
The government of Nepal has ensured the right to education of every child with and without a disability, in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2074 (2017). This Act has given all those working in education the encouragement to introduce a school system of inclusion. Since 2017, other governmental plans, policies, and subsequent educational acts have also advocated for inclusion of children with disabilities (Chaudhary & Ghimire, 2023). Several of my participants argued that while physically the autistic children were in the classroom, they were still being excluded from many of the class activities which contradicts the inclusive education policy; clearly, there is a long way to go with regard to equal opportunities and participation. The nation's provision of free and compulsory education to basic level demands collaboration with all the stakeholders concerned (Regmi, 2019).

The participants in my study all supported the idea of inclusion in terms of context and process, the two relevant themes. Inclusion in the Primary and Secondary context, however, based upon the provision of inclusion provided by the Constitution of Nepal 2015, is only in its infancy stage (Shiwakoti, 2022), and more and more classrooms need to be made a welcoming place for children with autism. In the participants' narratives, they all emphasise the need for improved access towards the learning process which in turn needs to be actively supported by the parents, and enhanced by the adults who are working in the classrooms with the autistic students.

The themes documented below are interlinked, specifically based on the contextual inclusion, which is based on the teaching-learning process.

Figure 1

Perception on Inclusion



Inclusion in education for all children with disability involves a move towards equal opportunities and equal participation (Merry, 2020). My participants believed that this movement must involve a multifaceted approach. The concept of inclusion in education for a child with autism in the regular classroom must begin with inclusion in the greater context of family and community (Van et. al., 2020). This is where the autistic child should first feel included, respected and involved. The inclusion in the primary context of home and in the child's community will help to promote inclusion in the secondary context of education. Kandel and Merrik (2007) state that in the home environment, when a child is born with a disability, the primary context acceptance can set positive coping skills in place for the child – for example, as the family members help to open doors towards equal access and participation. In short, it is not only about the teacher and the school context. In the move towards inclusion there is an important role for the parents and community in supporting and assisting the educating process.

Inclusion in the Context

This inclusion of context thus refers to students learning at home, in his/her community, as well as at school. In our context, when a child is enrolled into the school environment, a child's holistic development is a major concern, and this early educational setting emphasises the importance of the whole student. This holistic approach involves cognitive, social, intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual

development. The curriculum provided by the CDC (2017) for early childhood education clearly mentions the importance of the home environment as well as the school context - and this study reiterates the importance of both the home and the school working in tandem. My research also highlights the importance of the home-school collaboration where both spaces help the child with a disability to interact, adjust, play and learn. All of the participants agreed that autism is a disability where people's perceptions and pre-assumptions often effect the way children are treated both at home and in school. Wang and Walberg (1991) also emphasized the importance of a positive home and school context in helping with the movement towards greater and more constructive inclusion. In relation to the perceptions of my participants, I have categorized some sub-themes.

The Primary context refers to the small circle where the child spends most of his time during the toddler phase, while the school learning space relates to the Secondary educational context for inclusion. Most children with a disability can only successfully enter into the secondary context if they have already been exposed positively to primary inclusion (Bhargava & Narumanchi, 2011). From my participants' perceptions, the primary inclusion is about parental acceptance, belief and support for the child whereas the secondary context is centred on a learning space in the school setup. They believed that the success or failure of the efforts of the secondary context is linked to the good or bad approach in the primary context of family and community.

According to my five participants, children who are exposed to and received an inclusive environment at home and within their community have a higher acceptance rate within the secondary context stakeholders. Dixon et. al., (2022) revealed how families with disabled children are vulnerable in terms of pressure on their finances and social exclusion. He pointed out that such children and their parents often face social isolation in their own community. Teaching children with autism in a regular classroom opens the way for a child to experience equal participation regardless of their disorder and the background. However, as already stated, even the few autistic children who are accepted into a regular classroom can be left out of certain activities.

Inclusion in the Primary Context

Home, in a way, can be seen as the first school of a child and the place where children need to receive maximum support. Children with disabilities are often

exposed in large families, and it is a challenge for their parents, grandparents, care givers and other relatives within that primary context to try and respond as well as they can. When a child is born with a disorder, it creates stress in the family, and it is up to the family members to accept it and move forward. Baker-Ericzen et. al. (2005) highlighted the family stress as a result of having a child with disabilities, especially when there is social exclusion. My fourth participant (Roshani) had expressed how her own son with autism often faced discrimination, and was abandoned and neglected by members of his own family and by some members within the school environment. She narrated that when the child is born, he/she interacts with the parents, especially with the mother; the child's family and her/his home surroundings and the close relative circle is crucial in providing an inclusive context – as state by Roshani (12 October 2022). She acknowledged the importance of the interaction of the parents, especially the mother, as well as the larger family and community. Roshani considered this first group as essential in offering inclusion. My first participant, Ajita, recalled how members of her family considered the child with autism to be mad or “a psycho”. She shared how this negative and false preconception caused a lot of damage and prevented the child with special needs from receiving best practise and support. She saw how important it was for the autistic child to receive acceptance in the home environment, and shared: *children after birth spend quite enough time with his or her parents in the home environment.* (9 October 2022). Ajita also related how the father's positive loving relationship with his autistic child, and his ability to turn a blind eye to the social stigma, benefitted the ASD child greatly. In short, other people's opinions, a positive attitude and the way the family treat the autistic child from the outset is very important when it comes to inclusion (Saloviita, 2020). She believed that no matter the level of severity of disability of the child with special needs, there is always the possibility of a good life both at home and in the local community.

My second participant, Archana, also mentioned that child's relationship with the family, and how family members can help the autistic child to adjust in society. *If the child receives an inclusive approach at home, he/she can have a smooth transition during inclusion in the school* (10th October, 2022). As stated previously, the child also has a legal right to participate in social and educational life, which is assured by the constitution of Nepal and different laws promulgated by the government.

However, it is important to always bear in mind that the parents at home first and foremost determine the autistic child's early everyday life. The subsequent prevalence of children with disabilities in the education system and the outside world is affected by the all too prevalent social stigma and discrimination which they often face in the real world and among their community (Lamichhane, 2013).

My third participant, Sabita, also narrated stories in terms of context: *I have noticed that parents themselves are excluding their child in the home environment, and they also expect us to not allow their child to participate in any social function at the school* (11 October 2022). She too noticed that parents themselves were excluding their child with autism in the home environment – thus, it was no surprise that later in the school setting these same parents continued to be against increased interaction or inclusion. One reason for this is that they did not allow their child to participate in any social functions in the school as parents do not want to disclose that their child's behaviour differs from others (Neupane, 2020). Parbati also revealed: *My student's parents do not want to disclose about their child having autism and that he needs strong support in school* (13 October 2022). She narrated how her autistic student's parents did not want to disclose their child had autism, and this prevented their child from receiving important and much needed support in school. In the Nepalese scenario, any form of disability is often perceived as shameful and children with disabilities are excluded in their own surroundings due to false beliefs within our society. Panthi (2004), UNDP (2004) and Neupane (2020) highlight the barriers to education as a result of these backward and false beliefs, and furthermore, the worrying way parents of autistic children and other family members often face humiliation when they disclose their child's disorder to their own community.

There is no doubt that in the educating process, parents are the main stakeholders of inclusion. Thanks to the parents' decision, the autistic child is enrolled in the general school environment. Parents face lots of social blame and humiliation when they give birth to a child with a disability, which leads to a lot of stress within the family (Neupane, 2020). The general religious belief often creates a barrier, leading to the child with autism being further discriminated. All parents wish for a happy and normal life for their child, but at the very least all children should be offered love and support, and this is a right of every child according to our constitution. Our children with special needs are entitled to participate in our schools, although ultimately the decision comes down to the attitude of his or her parents.

There is a great need for the primary context of the disabled child to be lovingly supportive and actively inclusive.

Inclusion in the Secondary Context

The secondary inclusion context relates to the school environment. All of my participants work in private early childhood education centres and have children with autism in their classes. Gathering their experience on teaching children with autism in a regular classroom setting has been central to this study. Their pre-schools have given the access to education to all children, regardless of the children's special needs and created a space for further social inclusion (Robo, 2014). Most of the autistic children whom they taught were below the age of 6, and all were placed in the same educational environment as those without a special need. These schools, who practise inclusion, are following the recommendations of the government of Nepal, who have continuously made policy and provisions for inclusive education since the 1960s (Thapaliya, 2016). The notion of including children with autism in the regular classroom is supported by the legislation of the nation. Inside the school premises, all children whether they are with or without disabilities benefit and develop greater social and academic skills, if they are nurtured in a proper manner (Kaur, 2021). The key word in this statement is proper, as each child needs to receive the approach best suited to his or her needs.

My participants believed that inclusion of special children in the regular classroom not only allows for more positive improvements and equal access within the educational system but it also helps other student without disability to learn about the diverse environment in which they are growing up, and to see a more equal learning approach. All my participants who are teaching in the regular classroom have shown high levels of acceptance of children with special needs within the regular classroom. They also wish similar acceptance was coming from their colleagues and entire school staff, especially regarding the uniqueness and importance of each child. A greater level of acceptance from all the stakeholders within the secondary context such as school leaders, teachers and non-teaching staff inside the classroom will let students with special needs feel more welcome and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2012).

Teachers' perceptions outline the need for the classroom environment to be a place where all the teachers, classroom helpers assisting the children to learn, are interested in best practises. Roshani added: *when the school accepts the special child,*

it is a great start - and all the members of school need to share the same likeminded welcoming approach. It is important to make the regular classroom a more comfortable for the child with autism, and for all concerned to work to improve the child's readiness to adapt to the school environment. Jung et. al. (2019) stated that equal participation inside the learning space is the main premise of inclusion. All five participants in this research agreed that an inclusive approach to education within the secondary context would benefit all the students inside the classroom. Rattaz et al., (2019) demonstrated that individuals with autism perform better in an inclusive setting; they learn to be better able to understand the social context around them, which is learnt through the teacher's assistance and the example of their peers.

Ajita shared: *in my classroom all the students accept the child with autism; they are groomed in this way to provide a happy learning experience for all the children.* The acceptance of autism from teachers, other colleagues and students is crucial to make inclusive classrooms work and provide a better space for education (Kopetz & Endowed, 2012). Ajita perceived that in her classroom all the students accepted the child with autism and this enabled the child to have a happier learning experience, and the way that all the students in the class accepted each other benefitted everyone. She shared that inside every classroom the environment should be positive and accepting of all, in particular the special needs child. Ajita argued that there was a need for greater understanding and education around the subject of autism, as in her initial days, the students and their parents had some misconceptions regarding including a child with autism. Some of the students felt annoyed or jealous when they saw their teacher giving special attention to the child with autism. Even the way the autistic child sat nearer the teacher's desk was a problem in the beginning. Continuous informal talks for both the children and their parents helped to smooth out these issues and created a more positive and understanding classroom.

Archana shared: *exposure to school activities, and letting the child participate in various extracurricular activities is needed to make inclusive classrooms work properly.* Inside the school, Archana talked of creating a safe environment where the equal participation of all her students with and without autism was encouraged. She mentioned that some of her children avoided participating in extracurricular activities due to sensory issues - in these cases, she saw the need to provide alternative options, as in this way, the autistic child can still take part and feel part of the group. Her strategy is to focus on creating a safe and appropriate environment to tackle the

sensory difficulties of a child with autism; this has been in practise for numerous educators to ensure equal participation in regular classroom activities (Lindsay et. al., 2014).

My third participant Sabita spoke of the support of other staff in the school. She explained: *in school, one child is placed with many people, from morning to late afternoon, school guards, van drivers, classroom sisters, and other teachers from different classrooms; children share the social space with all members of the school. I have witnessed our children gradually adapt and overcome their socialization problems in the inclusive setting where they learn from others who help them in the socialization process* (11 October 2022). It is important, she argued, to remember that children share a social space with all members of the school, and so that everyone has a role to play in making him or her feel welcome. Sabita witnessed how gradually other school community members adapted and behaved more inclusively after seeing others set a good example. She also shared how she noticed whenever there was exclusion and poor interaction in the secondary context, the autistic child showed worsening behaviour and became more difficult to manage.

One of Sabita's autistic children got into the habit of staying awake all night and as a result was cranky throughout the day and refused to participate in class work or other activities. He was completely excluded from the classroom and the attitude of others in the class towards this child deteriorated. Some of Sabita's colleagues got annoyed and began to back bite; they made the job of trying to assist the student in question even harder and stopped supporting Sabita. She emphasized: *for a teacher, it is important to know what is behind the tiredness or crankiness of a student. Due to this sleep issue, my student was excluded from school activities, and this was later discussed with the parents.* This can only be done well within a supportive context. In the case related by Sabita above, the continuous tolerating of the special need child's behaviour inside the school without coming to know the hidden reason, only led to further problems and alienation.

When it comes to trying to include autistic children in regular classrooms, only a high level of acceptance and positivity help to create good bonds with all the students and staff, minimizing the chances of animosity (Kopetz & Endowed, 2012). In the case of Sabita, she was able to share the information about this particular child's lack of sleep with all the members of the staff and the other students, and this reduced the stigma and bad feeling.

My fourth participant Roshani who is also the mother of a child with autism shared: *before enrolling a special needs student into my class, first I observe the child's behaviour, I talk to the parents and gather all the information about the child, after which I have a meeting with my support teacher.* Roshani then has a meeting with all the teachers in the pre-school telling them that the special needs child has been enrolled and discusses with them the child's needs in the presence of the parents. She then makes an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) to support the child and outlines what extra support is needed. Roshani is aware that teaching is a team job and the various roles different members can play. She is committed to ensuring that the child is accepted by all means possible and that every member of staff is on board in supporting the child with special needs. The discussion regarding the child's character and the work towards a holistic goal involving teachers, parents and other staff members is essential in making an IEP (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). In Roshani's case, it was refreshing to see all groups working together to help the special needs child feel welcome and thrive in the school environment.

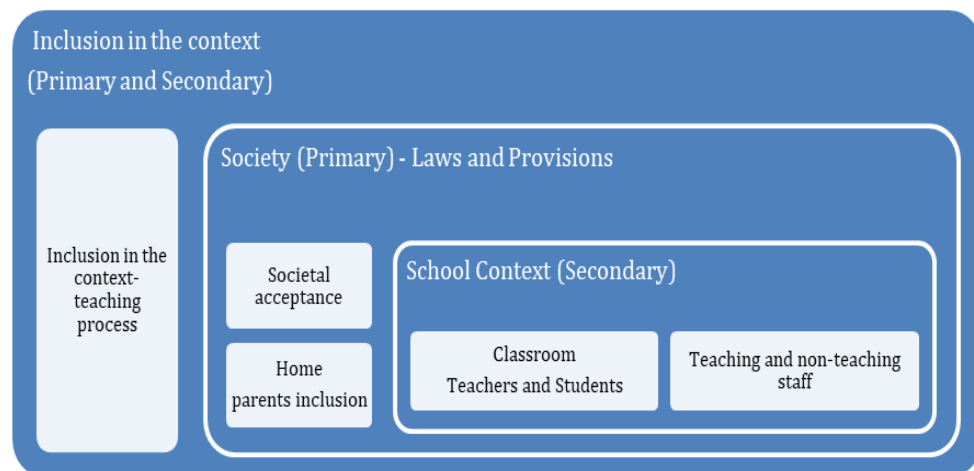
My fifth participant, Parbati narrated: *I believe support from other teachers is a must - all my plans and activities are prepared beforehand, we are collaboratively teaching and I mainly focus on the students who need a lot of support (CWA) in their academics. The teaching strategies are shared with my senior teachers, who provide inputs which are reflected in the plan for making a more inclusive classroom - this always encourages me to move forward* (13 October 2022). She repeatedly emphasized the importance of the support that the teacher receives from the parents, school administration and other colleagues. Although she has not received any form of official or formal training in teaching a child with autism, she has learned so much from experience and from the teacher under whom she is working. She pointed out that she never teaches in isolation, all the plans and activities are prepared together beforehand. She and the main teacher are collaboratively teaching, though Parbati mainly focused on assisting the students who need greater support in their academic work. The teaching strategies used are continually evaluated and this is reflected in the ongoing plans and efforts (Valli, 1997) to make the school a more inclusive place. One important goal which has been specially made for a child with special needs in their class, is to try and help the child open up more, and express himself better, in a bid to hopefully in the long run help him to create stronger bonds with those with whom he comes into contact.

Their approach involves personal support that helps create greater access for the autistic child in classroom activities, a tailoring of activities to his interests, and the involvement of other colleagues in setting goals that benefit the child. Parbati is continuously sharing her plans with others to make it more relevant for her children with autism. Sometimes she gets feedback from her colleagues as well and this helps her to work on her own weaknesses. The teamwork approach, and shared planning helps make the school setting more inclusive and relevant.

Teaching individuals with autism in a regular classroom is a prominent step towards inclusion within education for all children. This inclusion in the secondary context provides the opportunity for special needs children to learn alongside their peers. A good level of quality support which a teacher receives in the secondary context is essential, and a school where all the staff and members are working in tandem brings about more positive results.

Figure 2

Inclusion in the Context



In the interviews, all five teachers talked about the importance of a team approach, and of the importance of a positive primary family context feeding into a more inclusive secondary educational context. Sakarneh and Nair (2004) state that the better the contextual factors are within the primary and secondary contexts (home, community, and school environments), the greater they contribute towards a positive and inclusive experience. All the participants agreed with the point that children with special need should be accepted from the beginning. O'Brien (2001) also highlighted the importance of the acceptance of the special needs child and underlined the need for greater moral support and inclusion. The teachers in this study are at the forefront

of those working in a team context, along with families and other staff members, to try and bring about a better place for special needs children in our schools.

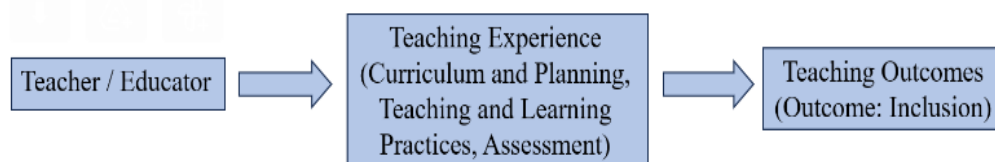
Inclusion in the Teaching - Learning Process

Discussions that I had with my participants' experiences and perceptions on including children with autism in their regular classrooms, has helped them to feel appreciated and renewed confidence in their teaching journey. Teachers are responsible to make plans, curriculum adjustments, running the class and re-evaluating when needed. In this section, I explore the inclusion process in the regular classroom which is common in all of my participants' early childhood development centres. All of my participants are following the curriculum guidelines provided by the Curriculum Development Centre for ECD level. I collected the participants' portrayal of the pre-school routines and how children were engaged inside and outside the classroom, and looked at the teaching process including teaching instruction throughout the day; we also discussed the parents' role, especially in their relating of the children's backgrounds.

The sub-themes generated under perceptions of the teaching process describe curriculum and planning, teaching and the learning practices, and assessment. Where teachers are found to be engaged more in teaching both children with and without autism, these components are interlinked with each other to provide the inclusive environment inside the classroom.

Figure 3

Inclusion in the Teaching and Learning Process



My fifth participant Parbati shared her experiences while taking a class during the Covid pandemic. She gave online classes for UKG grade, and all her students joined the Zoom platform. However, during the first week she noticed the behaviour of one child, who often got distracted while sitting in front of the teacher in the classroom. She noticed that this child's mother was shouting from the side and harshly holding the child's hand and forcing him to sit still on the couch. This

behaviour was observable for all the other students to see. The following week this child and his parents refused to stay online due to child's poor interest and sitting problems. Another participant Sabita shared that during her early days of encountering autism, she was badly criticized by the school principal when the child with autism failed the regular class test.

Both these participants endeavoured to teach the whole classroom without any discrimination and by maintaining uniformity however, the support that the autistic student requires was missing. They tried, in the beginning, to treat all the students in the same manner, and use the same curriculum, teaching and learning practices, and type of assessments, but this was not appropriate and had consequences. It also led to criticism from co-workers and parents, and this resulted in badly demotivated teachers, who struggled in both the short and medium term. In reality, not all students are the same, they all need more or less help, and in particular the autistic students have different special needs and show different ways of behaving. For our schools to be inclusive, the need of each individual child has to be considered - and this is especially so when autistic children are in the class. It cannot be a one approach for everyone template. Burying our heads in the sand and pretending that all the children in these classes are the same helps no one. It goes against openness, and prevents best policy and practice. Our classrooms have students with different learning and these need to be accepted and addressed - attending to these different needs promotes inclusivity. All of my participants spoke of how they had to mould the curriculum, and design different learning activities as well as alternative ways of assessment, that suited their students with autism.

Teachers are working to fulfil the needs of the child based on the framework provided by the CDC. The Early Childhood Education Curriculum (2017) is the basis for all teachers and provides the teacher guidelines. The curriculum is the representative documents intended to support teachers with their planning, planned content, teaching methodology and assessment for students (Prideaux, 2003). Although, all of my participants follow the ECD curriculum but they have adapted these plans and techniques according to the needs of the child, and following discussion with the school authorities.

Parbati shared her experience on the role of curriculum and planning, in her effort to make her classroom more inclusive: *every year, teachers sit together for 2-3 days and we go through the ECD curriculum provided by the CDC, and then we have*

a curriculum sharing session with the parents. These meetings are how we endeavour to adapt the learning objectives, for all our school children enrolled into UKG. This occurs only after completing 3 years of course PG, Nursery and LKG, so some of the content and methodology described in the curriculum is already complete. But going forward, we adapt the content, and introduce new teaching approaches with the help of colleagues and the school co-ordinator. For the special needs child, we set different learning goals and objectives and made extra plans (13 October 2022).

The experience of Parbati reminded me of my own teaching journey where I used to sit for annual training, as well as course planning and collaboration sessions with my colleagues. We discussed the content of what we were going to teach and the principles and values the school wanted to implant in the children. However, Parbati went a step further by engaging the parents of her autistic children in the learning journey, and hearing the parents' voice before designing the course syllabus. Every year, during the term break she had the opportunity to discuss the curriculum with a broader circle, and this helped all the stakeholders have an awareness of how the children were being taught inside the classroom. All the participants revealed that in their teaching experience, having a child with autism in a regular classroom helped to make the teaching process more multifaceted. Teaching is a process where the role of a teacher is to make all the learners understand, and it is about facilitating the student on their individual learning journey through various methods (Sequeira, 2012).

With this in mind, the CDC framework for teachers helped my participants set educational goals for all learners, both those with and without autism, in a more systematic way. The teaching process is an important component when it comes to creating a fair society. An inclusive approach helps to provide equal access and classroom participation for all learners. Through this approach, teachers are able to communicate with an individual child and make significant changes in the student's cognitive domain and social skills. The teacher aims to improve cognition (knowledge), psychomotor domain (skills) and affective domain (attitudes) as all humans are lifelong learners (Hoque, 2016).

The teachers make plans and design activities for their learners, which are matched with their needs in order to try and help each student reach their potential. With the individual needs in mind, different teaching processes and separate methods are designed.

My first participant Ajita shared: *as a teacher we have to allocate extra time to design individual student based activities, with a view to creating classwork or project work which they can easily follow and at the same time feel challenged. I always work with my assistant teacher.*

In Ajita's school, each classroom has two teachers, one is the lead with the other in a support role. They share the responsibilities, and with the individual student's best interests in mind, they divide their work. She mainly focuses on doing activities that are more difficult and organises differentiated instruction. According to her the aim of the school is to accept and give equal opportunity to all the students to help them gain the appropriate knowledge to improve their abilities.

Booth and Aircow (2002) stated that the teaching process is not only about allowing both students with and without a disability to enrol into a school, but argued that it was also about a responsibility towards best practice and individual improvement. In an effort to fulfil these aims, Ajita tried to introduce an optimal student-teacher ratio, while at the same time offering her assistance equally to all the students. She created small groups with similar learning abilities in a bid to meet the challenge of addressing the differences between her learners. Tomlinson (2001) revealed that in a well-planned classroom and in small groups, teachers are better able to use appropriate strategies and differentiate between varied students. The author (Tomlinson, 2003) further argued that he rejects the one size fits all approach, but instead urges teachers to follow responsive teaching, where the teacher responds to the individual needs of each student.

Ajita with the help of her assistant, endeavours to address the needs of all the children in her classroom and this involves careful planning, and making changes to the content that need to be taught. It also involves teaching the content differently depending on the student's needs, as well as a flexible approach to how the lesson might apply to real life. As my participant Archana also narrated:

As a teacher you should know when and where to take an action. You are working with sensitive children and your every action is being observed. During activities, I often encourage my students to carefully select a partner and where they sit. Clear instructions are given to help them select a group that suits their abilities, as this is most conducive for the children to learn from one another within the appropriate groups (10 October 2022).

Archana follows different strategies to promote inclusivity in her class. She gives autonomy to her students, especially, as mentioned above, when it comes to group work but she gives clear instructions on how each child in a group can work collaboratively. Archana emphasised how children, autistic or not, learn from friends and how working together helps them enhance their social skills. Children, by nature are curious and learn from imitating others whereas children with autism have less imitation skills; so creating an environment where they can learn the imitation skills helps in developing social-communication skills (Ingersoll, 2007). Ingersoll also states that due to autistic individuals low observational learning skills, the seat planning, group guiding and the role of a teacher and peers are of the utmost importance.

With regard to opinions around the assessment of a child, all the participants agreed that they are having similar assessment patterns for all students in their regular classroom. Only Roshani had a different approach of assessment. She uses an IEP (Individual Educational Plan) for each child and believes that assessment should reflect this student centred plan. She further added that we cannot teach all children in the same way, therefore we should not assess them in the same way. As a mother to an autistic child, Roshani believes that teachers should have the skills and ability to evaluate and identify the requirements of a child with special needs, and to tailor every stage of the teaching process to suit those individual needs. In the regular classroom, the inclusion of a child with autism with different learning needs should be wholehearted.

Roshani shared an opinion: *assessment and evaluation are important for our children in a continuous learning process, and as an early childhood educator especially, there is a unique challenge in celebrating the diversity in the classroom.* She also spoke of the option of teachers who work in an inclusive setting to use assessment to help motivate both parents and children along the learning journey, and believes that autistic children and students with varying needs rely on their support group for individual support.

Assessment is an essential aspect of this inclusive process. In the words of Galevsaka and Pesic: “assessment, defined as a systematic process for gathering data about student achievement, is an essential component of teaching.” (Galevska & Pesic, Page 1). During this assessment process all of my participants have faced difficulties and challenges. Four of my participants used the same assessment format

for all the students enrolled in their classroom. Only Roshani focused on a more individual approach; she used well trained and resourceful teachers to help her promote equal participation with a needs based assessment approach.

Reflecting on Theories

This chapter explored the narratives of the early childhood educators who participated in this study, and in particular explored their perceptions on inclusion. The narratives were given themes and were arranged on the basis of the research question related to exploring educators' perceptions on inclusivity of their classroom.

Regarding inclusion, Ajita, Archana, Sabita, Parbati and Roshani strongly agreed on the importance of the status of the home environment inclusion, as a first step towards classroom inclusion. They all spoke with one voice that before inclusion can be considered in the classroom, it needs to be practised at home and in the community. From an inclusive education perspective (Polat, 2011), the study reveals the importance of the home environment in fostering inclusivity in the classroom. The narrations of Ajita, Archana, Sabita, Parbati, and Roshani emphasize the need for inclusion to be practiced at home and in the community before it can be effectively implemented in the classroom - which aligns with the inclusive education theory (Simpson & Myles, 1998). In this sense, the home is considered the primary context of inclusion, while the school is seen as the secondary context. The support and inclusion of the child with special needs must begin at home, and it is fitting that it is considered the primary context of inclusion. Within the school, the child with autism needs acceptance from the school authority, his or her peers, and other parents for inclusivity to flourish. Furthermore, the importance of well-planned and differentiated learning practices must acknowledge the diverse needs of all learners, including those with special needs such as autism. This aligns with the theory of autism (Pellicano, 2010), which emphasizes the need for tailored approaches that meet the unique needs of individuals on the autism spectrum.

While most of the participants gave the same assessment to all their students, all of those who took part in this study accepted the importance of well planned, appropriate learning practices as well as using a differentiated approach which acknowledged the diverse needs of all the learners in an inclusive classroom. Finally, the importance of acceptance and support from school authorities, peers, and parents must be recognized in creating an inclusive classroom environment. This aligns with the theory of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 2012) which emphasizes the role of

social interaction and support in shaping individuals' learning experiences and outcomes. Overall, the study highlights the complex interplay of different factors involved in creating an inclusive classroom environment, including the role of home and community environments, tailored learning practices, and social support and acceptance.

CHAPTER VI

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS WHEN INCLUDING YOUNG CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN REGULAR CLASSROOM

In the previous chapter, I explored participant's perceptions on creating inclusive classrooms and critically analysed this component. Based on my participant's narratives and after critically analysing their input, it was clear that their experience working with autism highlighted the need for a more inclusive environment. This chapter addresses my third research question: What are the challenges of including children with autism?

At first, this chapter deals with and explores the challenges early childhood educators face. Here I have discussed the major hurdles in the context of teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Challenges Faced by Early Childhood Educators

As an early childhood educator being trained in child development and working in a pre-school setting for more than 4-5 years, when I first encountered the terminology autism, I was completely dumbfounded. I did not know anything about the condition. I learned by just observing children with ASD and their so-called 'unusual behaviour' (Attwood, 1993), by trying to figure out how best to develop and educate such children, as well as how to help with the improvement of their behaviour issues. The growing population of individuals with autism enrolling in the regular classroom was increasing fast and something more and more schools struggled with due to the lack of preparation on inclusion at that time. I tried to approach the child with autism as I would with other mainstream students, bearing in mind that each child's mental well-being was central to all teacher's remit. Slowly I learned how to adapt to the so-called 'unusual student' and acquired knowledge about the different facets of autism.

The participants in my study had similar experiences. They moved from a lack of knowledge regarding autism, into more understanding due to personal experience (Ballantyne et.al, 2021). They were thrown in the deep end, and had to sink or swim. One of my participants, Sabita remembered a day when her colleague from a play group class was sacked from her job because of the difficulties she encountered with an autistic student. The student in question created so much trouble that the colleague

was unable to cope. Sabita recalled that in the play group, they used to segregate times for short naps, but on one occasion during the nap time, a child with autism scratched two others badly while they were sleeping by his side. Later they discovered that the child who had scratched the others, had wanted to go to the toilet but was not able to communicate his need to the teacher; in response he scratched the others and made them cry. This difficulty to communicate needs or wants is a big challenge when dealing with autism (Vogindroukas et. al., 2022), and in more advanced schools the use of picture signals is helpful here (Bateman & Wilson, 2021). Also Sabita indicated on the role of the teacher in charge to know the child with ASD as well as possible, and have regular access to parents, who are the primary carers and the ones who already know the signs that their special child uses. Sabita further added:

In the case of the child who scratched the others, the colleague applied antiseptic cream on the face of the children who had being hurt, and as she did, the boy with ASD pointed towards his genitals and the teacher figured that he needed to go to the toilet. On the next day, however, she was called by the school authorities and complaints from the two of the parents led to the colleague having to resign from her post (14 November 2022). This highlights the difficulties when dealing with a student with autism, and these can create extra pressure and fear. Sabita and other staff members were upset about the action taken by the school authorities, and it made them feel more vulnerable in their jobs. The incident also led to them having a very negative perception towards the boy with ASD.

Sabita spoke of how teachers started to reduce their time with the autistic child. They didn't want to risk their own jobs. She admitted that other teachers started limiting the child's activities and this was undoubtedly partly because of their limited understanding of autism (Healy et. al., 2013). As Sabita herself explained, in the beginning she had all kinds of misconceptions about the condition. Like many others, she considered it to be a brain disease. She narrated that she slowly started to feel sorry for the child who had been diagnosed with autism and instead of involving him in the daily class activities, she used to let her autistic child play freely – she did not want to take away his freedoms or stand in the way of what he desired to do.

Ajita also had similar experiences trying to deal with a child with autism in the regular classroom, where there was not enough support staff. She stated:

I had to look after the other children without autism as well. I was not able to give him enough of my time and as a consequence the child with autism often engaged

himself playing with his regular toy. He enjoyed rolling the wheels of his toy car. He rarely sat inside the classroom and spent most of his time outside of class.

In the beginning she did not want to keep the special needs child in her class, but she was ordered by the school authority to keep the child in her class without any extra support or background information and no guidance from the school authority. She observes that even in schools where mentorship and guidance is offered, many teachers do not want to keep children with autism in their class.

Including autistic children in the regular classroom is surrounded by fears and negativity, and yet the teacher's motivations and positive attitude are essential to help teach the child with autism in the regular classroom and provide the opportunity for equal participation (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The acceptance of a teacher and intrinsic positivity and motivation to support a child with special need seemed missing in the context of Ajita and in many other schools nationwide (Shrestha et. al., 2019). This, while understandable, is something that needs to be addressed if the inclusion of individuals with autism is to progress.

Discussions about the challenges my participants faced, led to the generation of the following themes, discussed below.

Culture of Autism “From Myths to Reality”

The major insight that this study revealed is that there is a huge misrepresentation of autism and lack of understanding surrounding the condition. All five participants had no previous knowledge of the condition. All of them had misconceptions in the beginning, and that includes my fourth participant, Roshani, who is the mother of child with ASD. She hadn't heard of the term before, and it was new to her too. As Roshani narrated: *I decided to be a mother at a late age, and most of the time I gave time to my career. I considered myself a bad mother because my in-laws and close family relatives blamed me and my husband for having a child with special needs.* Baron-Cohen and Bolton in their book *Autism* (1993) states that the facts show that it is a misconception to put autism down to bad parenting; they shared that biological and other pregnancy complications might be somewhat behind autism but that by and large the cause of autism is still very much a mystery. It supports the view parents like Roshani have held and helps them by showing that autism cannot be simply put down to bad parenting. The evidence is inconclusive, although there may be some biological causes.

My first participant, Ajita, held the view that autism was a ‘mental issue’. She considered it to be some kind of mental retardation. She shared the belief that a child with autism, at a first glance, looks perfectly fine in every aspect of physical development, although their intelligence level and ways of interacting with other human beings in the same society is impaired and different. She later realized that autism and mental retardation are different types of disability.

In her own words, she said: *I started perceiving autism as one form of mental retardation but later I explored on the internet and came to know that it is just a brain condition which delays child’s developmental capacity, and discovered that a child with autism can score better than a person with mental retardation.*

Ajita holds the belief that individuals with autism are often as capable of doing academic work as their mainstream peers. Another myth about autism, which was prevalent in my research participants, was the notion that regular schools are not the place for a special needs child. In the beginning, all of them (except Roshani) believed that a child with ASD should be kept in a special school where they receive proper support and care because in the normal classroom environment the sheer number of students and the class sizes make it impossible to address the needs of the special child (Al-Sharbaty et. al., 2015). In this regard Sabita said: *I believed that special children should be kept in the special school, and that the teachers and the teaching approaches in the special school provided the best platform for special needs children. I thought our regular classrooms were not equipped with enough resources or knowledge to deal with these special needs children. However during my teaching journey, I saw how it is possible for them to fit in, provided we are self-motivated and assisted by greater resources. I grew to believe that each individual is a part of this society, and they should not be isolated in any way.* (14 November 2022).

This is perhaps the most contentious issue surrounding autism today - whether inclusive education or special needs schools are the best place for the child with autism, and the most argued and debate subject in this field concerns special needs schools versus regular schools. All of my participants found it difficult to accept or understand that all students are on the spectrum and as such each one deserves to be taught together in a way that deals with their diverse needs. Many countries in the world have already formulated a disability act that ensures equal participation to a person with a disability and has enshrined their right to feel they are a part of society (Klees & Qargha, 2014). Other education systems favour integration and offer any

child with any form of disability the best support and inclusion possible, believing they deserve to be treated equally. Yet, the gains and value of inclusion within mainstream education for these special needs children is still a matter of debate. Researchers, academics, and even the voices of those representing the person with the disability have varied responses to the question (Shah, 2007). Stinson and Lang since 1994 also highlight the different opinions while Pitt and Curtin (2004) advocate to ensure harnessing student strengths and working on a child's weaknesses no matter where they are placed.

All of these expert voices agree that the question of the appropriate placement for a child with a disability, whether it be a special school or regular school, remains the most controversial and debatable subject. In a bid to try and help with this discussion, the symptoms of autism have been outlined and a scientific overview of the condition outlined. The DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition) lists impairments in social skills as well as a need for structure and consistency, while Joon maintains those with autism are characterized by having not only persistent impairments in reciprocal social communication and social interactions, but also restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities (Joon et al., 2021, p. 1). The scientific listing of symptoms goes some way towards informing the discussion about where children with ASD should be placed, and the specific needs they have that need to be addressed.

Teachers' Challenge on Social Domain

Another major challenge centres on the teacher's lack of understanding regarding the child with ASD and the social domain. This challenge revolves around trying to discover the ASD child's ability to socialize and utilize social skills according to their developmental milestones. As stated by Kasari and Patterson, "our children with autism exhibit impairments with social skills" (Kasari & Patterson, 2012). As Roshani narrated: *my son did not make eye contact throughout his toddler phase. My eldest daughter used to smile at me when we called her, but my son was not responding to our call; and neither did he respond to the care taker or my in-laws, despite spending a lot of time with them.*

Roshani explained that the first symptoms she observed in her child was this poor eye contact. According to Trevisan et. al. (2017), children with autism avoid eye contact and the authors argue that due to their poor or complete avoidance of eye contact, the person in their surroundings often feels confused and put off, resulting in

the child with ASD often facing social exclusion. It is important that from the beginning in the classroom the child with ASD is helped with this eye contact issue (Banire et al., 2021). The normal greeting and welcome time where every student greets their teachers and peers is something that needs early attention.

Ajita stated: *all my students in the classroom, greet me every day, and they greet one another. When I teach them they look at me in the eyes; however, although I know that my 2 children with ASD have improved with their social and communication skills, they still rarely make eye contact with me or with their friends. They sit near my table but I am not sure whether they are listening to me or not.*

A very important means to communicate is through eye contact, and neither Ajita or Roshani felt that they were being listened to because of this lack of eye contact. The teachers hardly remember an occasion when their child with ASD looked at them like the other students did. When these teachers were looking at their children with ASD, they found that the children were looking somewhere else, and it was hard for them to know what was going on in the mind of that child.

Ajita added:

I use quite a lot of non-verbal communication in the classroom. If I find the classroom has become very noisy, for a while I stare at my students. I use my eyes to convey the message and the students understand that they should be quiet and give their attention to me. However, this approach does not work with autistic students. My autistic students did not understand this gesture as they lacked this ability to make eye contact with me. In addition, we naturally make eye contact when somebody calls our name; it is a very automatic thing to do. But the child with ASD is not the same as us and this is not a natural reaction for the autistic child. We get social cues when we maintain eye contact with a person next to us. We learn many things from their facial expression, but when our young autistic children avoid eye contact, many social cues are lost. (13 November 2022).

Ajita still is confused regarding how she can enhance her student's eye-contact, because she tried to enforce it forcefully a few times, but decided to stop because she found it created more stress in her students with ASD.

Another communication challenge in this domain realised by my research participants was the inability of students with ASD to communicate their needs and wants (Levin et.al, 2015). To complicate matters further, my participants have verbal

and non-verbal students with ASD in their classroom. Children with autism have a limited ability to communicate with people and it is hard for them to express their desire appropriately if they have not been taught. Indeed, the exhibition of communication impairment is one of the core areas of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

My third participant Sabita shared: *in communication, I used to use many adverbs pronouns, like: here, there, she, he or they - but our children with autism often became confused with these words because they can be utilized in any place, and with anyone. This incapacity to grasp common adverbs and pronouns can create further impairment in our child's learning ability.*

Sabita has had therefore to re-evaluate her approach when teaching words. The basic selection of a word during basic communication examples has had to be changed and adapted, after taken into consideration the ASD child's level of understanding and extent of word recognition. When dealing with children with ASD she has to be far more elective and sensitive to the child in question.

She adds:

It is very easy to teach child without autism, they understand your gesture and relate to the words you use, you do not have to be very selective in terms of words, but for the child with autism you have to take a different approach. You have to ask yourself how do you teach them a concept or how should you communicate? And the answer is to use a word, but then continually check whether they have understood the concept or word, or whether it has been too hard for them. I have also found that they will forget everything by the next day, and so you need much more repetition. You need to repeat entire chapters again and again, as they forget what I have taught in the class before, especially if I do not teach them using various cue cards, with lots of repetition and at a much slower pace. (14 November 2022).

Sabita has faced many communication problems with her students, which is a main barrier to the child's social skills. She showed me the picture book from which she uses the normal cue card to teach children with special needs as part of their Individual Educational Plan. One of her children has a problem with echolalia (meaningless repetition of words just spoken by another person), especially if she expressed a word in a funny way; one of her autistic children sometimes picked up on an unusual and meaningless phrase and repeated the word throughout the day. Sabita

was constantly concerned for her student's communication issues in the classroom, as it was created a challenge for both teacher and child to interact with each other. Inside the classroom, the work on students' interaction and communication skills is a basic part of the educational program, and due to the challenges in communication and this repetition of words and phrases, my research participant often found other colleagues making negative remarks. In addition, other typically developing children in the class showed little interest in the child with autism (Neely et al., 2016); this leads to social exclusion.

My participant Parbati shared similar concerns in relation to the three autistic children with whom she has been working as a shadow teacher. In this regard, she narrated:

Other students without autism easily asks or questions you if he/she doesn't know anything. They are able express their concerns. They can express their needs and they can ask you if they have a problem. But for our children with autism, this is not easy and communicating is a big deal and many times they can't communicate their concerns. A child without autism can easily say if he doesn't like certain things, if the child doesn't like to colour or write or exercise, he/she will easily tell you and then I won't force them to do it. If they are not feeling well they can easily say it but for a child with autism, sometimes they might be angry or in a bad mood or sometimes they are sick but they cannot express it or let you know. This is the major challenge I am facing now. (18 November 2022).

Parbati is clearly at her wits end trying to find ways to communicate with her ASD students, and find out how she can understand them in a better way. Our students spend over four hours in school, and this period of time is very difficult without proper communication - it is hard for a teacher to know the moods and interests of the child with ASD if he/she cannot make it clear. This causes a major socialization problem, especially, when you have a child with a limited vocabulary and sometimes an inability to speak. Parbati further added:

Children with autism cannot socialize like normal children. For example, they hardly participate in group play activities. Mostly children with autism whom I looked after, preferred to be alone and play with themselves. I literally did not have any ideas on how to interact with this child or how to help him make friends with other students.

The Early Childhood Development curriculum emphasizes the importance of developing social skills as one of the key components during early childhood development. All my participants initially experienced major difficulties due to communication problems, and believed most teachers are at a loss and do not know how to overcome this challenge. They are confused about the way ASD children interact with teachers and other developing peers, and this adds to the problems with socialization.

Archana shared further on the challenges related to an ASD child's social skills:

I am having a great problem with socialization and don't understand why one of my autistic students finds it so difficult to socially interact and take part in social activities. My student with autism is not interested in participating in group work, she just enjoys playing with a toy she brought from home. There won't be any learning outcomes as long as this child is just isolated playing with the same toy again and again - and this is the one activity this child does in school. When parents ask for learning outcomes I am silent and don't have a word. I found it very hard to engage the autistic child with other students in the classroom (14 November 2022).

Archana doesn't believe that forcing children to learn and to socialize is the answer. She instead believes there is a need for a shadow teacher or another facilitator who can help to inspire and encourage children to participate in group tasks. Archana does not have any specific training or knowledge about autism and so she is not able to understand the child's social domain or behavioural habits, thus feels it is extra hard for her to try and engage with autistic children. She further added that the students in her class love to do peer activities and sometimes, despite all her planning, the child with autism cannot cope with the socialization process; this is clearly one of the core impairments in autism (APA, 2013).

The regular child's interpersonal skills and the way that they socialize is developed according to the child's developmental ability. However with our children with ASD, who struggle to pay attention, their development and optimum participation is not possible without proper intervention (Runcharoen, 2014).

All of the participants in this study are experiencing communication issues and believe that this further leads to social exclusion in the classroom. Due to the different spectrums of autism, Roshani, despite being a degree holder of inclusive education

and the mother to an ASD child, is also facing problems and finding it hard to cope with the challenges. The different play skills required for each child in kindergarten and the demand for a different approach for each child presents a daunting challenge. With these issues surrounding social and communication skills, all the participants find it especially difficult to deliver on the expected academic content to their students with autism.

Teachers Challenges Concerning the Behavioural Domain

Children are curious and great explorers, which sometimes leads them to be a bit naughty which is a normal part of their childhood development. As far as I remember in my childhood, I used to have so many questions, and loved to experiment with and explore unusual things which I found very funny. Behaviour is our reaction towards the surrounding environment (Lazzeri, 2014). It is how we learn to integrate with the environment around us. Children are expected to show certain challenging behaviours at times; however, when it came to children with ASD, the teachers involved in this study, often found their behaviours excessively difficult and challenging like other teachers in the west (Gregor & Campbell, 2001).

In this regard Archana revealed:

Behavioural issues are a huge concern and there are great problems with autistic students with regard to classroom discipline. Other children get offended by behaviour of autistic children, and, as a result, sometimes bully the child; when we give extra care to the autistic child, other students may also become jealous. Autistic children sometimes also show unusual behaviour, for example, continually crying or getting angry or excited for no apparent reason.

Behavioural challenges are sometimes linked with other sensory issues (Baker et. al., 2008); however, as a result of my participant's narratives, I have kept behaviour and sensory issues separate. For example, Archana added that she had a child with a spitting issue and the child's sniffing of private parts was also difficult to observe.

According to Sabita and Roshani, the behavioural difficulties are associated with the communication issues. If a child is continuously showing some abnormal behaviour, perhaps associated with health or a medical issue, the mainstream child can say something - but sometimes the only way the autistic child can get your attention is by misbehaving. Observation of a child and figuring out why the child is

behaving in certain ways is very difficult for both these teachers, especially as individuals with autism can develop unusual behaviours anytime; even small changes and adjustment can make them hyper or cause a swing in their mood (Maskey et. al., 2013). Observation of the child to isolate the source of the behaviour takes time, something that the teachers have little of when managing a class of 20.

The teachers agreed that most of the time they are not prepared for such swings. Teachers are prepared and trained to deal with the occasional misbehaviour of mainstream students but not to deal with the continual disruption often brought about by the ASD students. Teachers are only prepared to deal with their behaviour problems that occasionally disturb the regular classroom environment. While talking about the behavioural issues surrounding students with ASD, all the teachers in this study seemed hopeless and despondent. They felt their situation was helpless. The behavioural issue shown by children with ASD such as biting, spitting and scratching left them at a loss, and caused the teachers to regularly lose their tempers.

Children with ASD clearly exhibit behaviour that can be challenging for teachers to manage in a classroom setting (WHO, 2019). While children are naturally curious and explorative, these behaviours can sometimes be extremely disruptive and pose a huge challenge for teachers. For example, as outlined above, children with ASD may show unusual behaviour such as excessive crying, anger, and excitement. These behaviours can be a result of sensory issues or other factors that are difficult for teachers to understand and manage.

Parbati spoke of the many behavioural issues she had witnessed in connection to children with autism, however certain extreme behaviours such as hand flapping and playing with objects was seen as unacceptable for other parents, teachers and students. Frequent running, problems in sitting, and harming themselves and other such problematic behaviours were also mentioned (Mazurek et. al., 2013). Parbati added that one child used to hit his friend, he used to pinch her, and it was so painful she and another teacher used to cry every single day. This is another clear example of how difficult it can be teaching children with ASD. Parbati described it as ‘very tough’:

There is a kid who loves to punch and kick and if he is not able to punch, he just pulls people’s hair, he appears to enjoy troubling other people. Hitting other people every single hour was very normal for this child, and I remember him hitting my private parts, which makes everything extremely difficult. It

was hard to work in such an environment. We had another little autistic girl who used to just enjoy taking all her clothes off, which is very difficult for a male teacher, and she had to be often whisked away by other female teachers (18 November 2022).

Mostly when we look through the lens of the inclusive education perspective, we will find that including children with autism in regular classrooms has many advantages (Beghin, 2021), but there is no denying, that, for Parbati, looking after three special needs children in a regular classroom is a very challenging job. Teachers face further challenges when dealing with the other students in the same class, who may become offended, or put out by the behaviour or attention the autistic child is receiving. As stated earlier, the extra care that is required for children with ASD can lead to jealousy among other students.

When in the presence of a teacher, one child hits another, the ASD child's habit of hitting is often not understood by his peers, and this is another challenge faced by the teachers. How to react to such behaviour is a challenge. It is hard for a teacher to be seen to be inconsistent, and natural that teachers wish to show impartiality.

Parbati further added:

One boy pulled my trousers down in front of the whole school; how shameful it was, but what would be the appropriate solution or punishment for this sort of behaviour caused me a lot of confusion. The children had the habit of throwing objects and harming his friends. This was very common, but I was not able to justify why these incidents happened and unable to find ways to change this behaviour. Last week one of my children with ASD hit me with the swing seat on my chest and I almost fainted. I got feverish and had to go home early that day. This happens to students as well. Suprim's favourite toy was taken by Misha recently and Suprim attacked Misha. We were not able to separate them. Oh God, how awful it was when Suprim grabbed a handful of hair of Misha. Suprim attacked Misha for the whole week, even though she already returned the toy, but to see how he kept on attacking Misha was very scary (18 November 2022).

Ajita had a similar experience. She explained:

One child often pushed his friends, and once he pushed a normal child which caused a small cut in a forehead. I was so scared as he was bleeding and I

can't express my anger at the autistic child who didn't understand the scenario. The wounded boy got 4 stitches in his forehead. I was scolded badly from the Principal Sir and the boy's parent. I finally convinced them that about the child's difficult behaviour. I outlined how he had frequent mood swings and how he was often shouting, banging his head and getting excessive complaints from other colleagues (13 November 2022).

The challenges faced by teachers when managing behavioural issues in children with ASD are numerous. Hand flapping, playing with objects, running, and harming oneself are just a few examples of the types of behaviour that teachers may encounter. Teachers must be prepared to deal with these behaviours, but many feel unprepared to handle the situation, leading to a breakdown in the classroom environment.

The solution to managing behavioural issues in children with ASD is not always clear, and teachers are often left feeling helpless and hopeless. Punishing children for their behaviour is not an effective strategy (Bassam et al., 2018), and teachers must instead work to understand the underlying causes of the behaviour and provide support accordingly. It is also important to remember that not all behaviours can be managed in the classroom setting and that additional support may be required for some children with ASD.

Inclusive education can be a valuable approach for supporting children with ASD in the classroom, but it is clear that this is not without its challenges. Teachers must work to balance the needs of all students in the classroom and provide individualized support as needed (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010). With the right strategies and support, however, it is possible for teachers to manage behavioural issues in children with ASD and provide a positive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Overall, the challenges that teachers face when managing behavioural issues in children with ASD are complex and require a nuanced understanding of the needs of individual students. By providing appropriate support and working collaboratively with parents, teachers can help children with ASD to thrive in the classroom and beyond.

Teachers Challenges on Sensory Issues

My participants all faced difficulties inside and outside classroom activities due to child's sensory issues. The sensory issue normally centres on the five sense

organs but in autism there are seven sensory organs, as vestibular (balance) and proprioceptive (position and movement) senses are also important (Trudel et. al., 2023). These extra senses refer to the balancing and posture of the body; with normal physically fit children these sense organs do not create issues, but for children with autism, they might experience hyper or hypo sensitivity (Kadlaskar et al., 2023)

For example, Archana, revealed that one of her students was fond of loud music. Her child is hypo, and he sought out loud sounds. To get these loud sounds, Archana shared how that child with autism used to beat his friends and enjoy hearing them cry, or how he would sometimes bang the desk and table. The challenge for the teachers is to understand the sensory needs of such a child.

ASD affects how our children with autism perceive the information through different senses (Bamicha & Drigas, 2022). The autistic child's different relationship to sensory issues can cause the whole class to be disturbed. When the child with ASD is placed in a normal school, and the teacher does not understand the child's nature and needs, it is almost impossible to deal with the challenge to manage and minimize certain behaviours.

Baker claims that almost all of the behavioural issues appear due to sensory reason. (Baker et. al., 2008). In this paper, he argues that the child with autism shows sensory processing dysfunction, normally. We react and respond to the information we gather from our sense organs to form a proper response, as certain parts of our brain manage the stimulation and give an appropriate response accordingly - but due to the ASD person's dysfunction in sensory processing, they exhibit unusual responses and this is identified as a key challenge for teachers.

In contrast, Roshani spoke of a child who gets hyper when he hears loud noise, and goes out of his way to avoid it. He closes his ears, and becomes annoyed. In school, for example, there might be a dance class, or some class where the students will be singing loudly or making noise; this child who is hyper with sound will get increasingly agitated.

Archana and Ajita shared how they felt embarrassed and concerned when their children with autism developed the habit of smelling their private parts and smelling their own excrement - both of these children had issues with child olfaction, the sense of smell. The DSM-V incorporate this tendency and the sensory processing component as one part of the autistic diagnostic category; most researchers show

evidence that individuals with autism seek out strong smells as one of the features of autism (Galle et. al.,2013).

Ajita went on to speak of how these habits add to the likelihood of the child with autism being bullied and isolated from the group. She narrated:

No-one likes the child who smells his own poop, and the other children in the group start avoiding such a child. I found my classroom usher and other children humiliating an autistic child just because this child was attracted towards unusual smells.

The teachers, classroom peers and classroom helpers struggle to understand this inclination towards unusual sensory issues, and often fail to see that the child is genuine in his inclination; as a result, the child with special needs can become the victim in such situations.

Parbati shared how one of her female students, who is comparatively older than her peers, does not like cotton clothes and whenever she wears any clothes made out of cotton, she tends to take off all her clothes wherever she might be. She further shared how this student was very sensitive towards her hair and she never combed her hair. As a result, it was always messy and infested with lice. This was extremely off-putting, as was the fact that she neither let her hair or nails be cut. She also had experiences with another child who never wanted to wear shoes and socks. As Pernon pointed out, some children with autism have an inability to tolerate textures that they encounter in their daily lives (Pernon et al., 2007). Inside the classroom the typically developing peers do not want to be a friend with a child with untidy hair and poor hygiene, which leads to further exclusion inside the classroom.

I remembered when I had a child with autism during my initial days of teaching and he used to flap his hands and flick his fingers. He never stood properly, and he always wanted to lean on me or towards the wall. It was my experience too that such behaviour and physical abnormalities often results in their peers, and even other working colleagues, disliking the autistic child.

Roshani also shared that some of her students with and without autism had a poor grip, and unbalanced gross motor skills. She indicated sensory issues are found with both children and claimed it was not only a problem for the autistic child. Roshani felt that if the child is sensorily nourished, they can grow to have good motor responses. Her own son had an issue with body balance and seemed clumsy. She noticed that when the parents and other peers observed these issues, it made them

reluctant to make friends with the autistic student and they often tagged him or her as a 'Lathebro baccha' (physically abnormal) child.

Parbati spoke of having difficulty teaching using visual boards as one of her children has an issue of sight glazing, which means he is more sensitive than others to sunlight. In line with the statements of the participants in this study, many researchers in the field of autism have shown evidence that, due to an autistic child's sensory processing impairment, they exhibit behaviour issues (Simmons et. al., 2009). Sabita also indicated that children with autism are often isolated from academic work, stating:

Inside the classroom, we have plans and activities to be done, however one of my autistic children has a behavioural issue due to his sensory needs, and is continually disturbing the other children, hitting and biting them, and this is frustrating. I do not have enough knowledge to tackle it - yes, I found information from the internet but this is limited, and we do not have resources to help these children.

She was upset as she spoke of herself as an enthusiastic teacher and self-motivated learner, who is doing online studies to tackle her student's sensory needs. However, she added, she found her efforts were insufficient due to the lack of resources and supportive assistance.

Archana spoke of the need to modify the plan and activities designed for autistic students but admitted this was time consuming and energy draining.

One of my child has the habit of side glancing, and I am not sure whether she is looking at me or not. We let our students copy from the board, but many times I have found her doing side glancing. However, the parents are not that concerned, and as a result, with this child, I am not able to complete my academic goals. I consider it a medical issue.

As Mottron states, vision related issues, such as side glancing, staring at only one object, looking through and beyond objects, are more common in autism (Mottron et. al., 2007). The role of parents on identifying the child's sensory needs is helpful to the teachers as it enables them to understand the nature of the sensory issues that need to be addressed. However, often, as in Archana's case, this support is lacking. If the sensory concerns are related to a child's medical condition, early intervention is important as proper therapy can work.

Archana, Ajita, and Sabita all faced criticism from both parents and school management. Parents complain and they often receive a cold response from their school authorities as they were not able to understand the sensory issue difficulties and how they related to the behaviour of their autistic children. Parbati received complaints from other parents, who wanted her to teach special needs children separately as some other neuro-typical children were copying the behaviour of the autistic child. It's important to remember that autism is a condition where some children might exhibit sensory processing impairment. Due to our poor understanding and lack of support or resources, children with autism show adjustment problems, which can also affect the regular students, and subsequent isolation during their academic journey.

Childrens' Age and Level of Support

During their teaching careers, Ajita and Archana encountered students much older than their class's typical age range. Despite the fact that the curriculum is designed for children aged 4 to 5, students with special needs and who have lower levels of cognitive development are sometimes placed with younger students in order to maintain academic standards.

Research have shown that children with autism have cognitive impairment, although on the other hand they may have strengths in other developmental aspects (Bamicha & Drigas, 2022). According to Ajita, in some cases, students who are struggling academically are not failed but rather held back due to certain assessment practices that relate to their generally poor cognition levels. This can be a difficult issue to navigate, as promoting students who are not yet at the appropriate level could cause them undue pressure and stress.

The discourse on chronological age versus mental age is set to continue for some time, but the problem often victimizes the child and puts an extra burden on teachers. Cognitive development includes measuring the brain's capacity to function at certain tasks, the child's organizational skills, perception and making meanings. This is carefully observed and within the debate, teachers often compare the developmental milestones of neuro-atypical child with neuro-typical child in this context (Bremner, 2001).

Ajita spoke of one particular student that caused concern; he was a child who was around 10 to 11 years old, but was placed in a class with children aged 5½ to 6½. The child's age and the high level of support he demanded were causing anxiety

among the parents, who were worried that the child could harm others due to his size and developmental differences. With only two staff members in the class, it was a challenging situation to manage.

Ajita further added that, due to this being a big issue amongst the parents, some elementary schools, despite the country's legal policy, do not want to have children with a disability. Hence the child with special needs often attend a pre-school run by their relatives; at times, the parents themselves have to be a promoter of a school to enrol their child in that school.

On the other hand, there is the government policy regarding inclusion, and yet, as Roshani outlined, the implementation process is lagging behind. She herself has devoted her career into educating young children with autism. She chose to be a teacher and work as a pre-school educator to support her own special needs child. She also has first-hand experience of how her autistic child was shunned during the admission procedure, and how her child was rejected by many schools, with different excuses being made such as: we have no-provision for special children, we lack human resources, or the other parents will object. The school where she eventually enrolled her child, did not recognize the special ability of her son, and teachers did not promote inclusivity inside the school. She even found that the school leader gave instructions not to engage her son in Montessori lab activities and to exclude him from attending the few group activities. This reveals that there is a long way to go before ASD children are made to feel welcome at our schools. The challenge to properly support what the parents expect and to dramatically enhance the current level of knowledge and skills of a teacher in order to provide enough space and opportunity to the special needs child is daunting.

Inclusion + Without Preparation = Exclusion

Another big challenge my participants faced was the lack of preparation to support children with autism in a regular classroom, and the lack of foresight on the part of the school authority. And I, too, recall how running an inclusive classroom required lots of preparation, intricate planning and a greater understanding. There was also a need to ensure that the parents were on board, and to prepare the scene for welcoming the child with special needs.

Lack of Orientation

The perception and current practice of my participants in the regular classroom shows the discourse of inclusion in the context and the process. From the

policy viewpoint, the right of a child with and without autism is assured, and for the research purpose, I have chosen the schools who enrol children with autism. However, the teachers observe that there are some barriers to the inclusion, as Archana shared:

One of the biggest challenges I faced as a teacher was the lack of support when it came to educating students with special needs. Although I am not a trained special education teacher, I was assigned an autistic child in my class. I provided this child with extra attention and support, but got no help from the parents. In fact, during the parent-teacher meeting, many of them complained about the behaviour of the autistic child and demanded his removal from the class.

Archana revealed that the perception of other parents towards the child with special needs is still negative; as a result, many of them do not want a child with autism with their children in the classroom. Maudslay (2014) has stated that perception about disability in the context of Nepal and India is highly negative due to linking the condition with past karma and religious beliefs.

The school where Archana is currently teaching is one of the reputed pre-schools in Kathmandu Valley, yet despite it being in the capital city, many people are not able to support the practice of inclusivity in their child's school. As outlined above, Archana indicated the behaviour and sensory issues of a child with autism, who often disturbs other children, and the greater risk of him or her hurting other children in the classroom – these are matters of great protest amongst parents.

The school is obliged by the law to be inclusive but the lack of preparation and support makes it very difficult. Ajita has also suffered because of parents complaining:

We work whole heartedly and yet complaining parents fail to understand our problems and make us feel bad. The parents of other children don't want the autistic children in the regular classroom, while the parents of autistic children have unrealistic expectations for their child. They always compare their child with normal children and ask us to focus on the academic aspect.

Ajita seemed very disheartened when speaking about the challenges and the unrealistic expectations of the parents and how they were trying to compare one autistic child to other mainstream children. Parbati agreed with Archana and Ajita, and states:

Most of the parents requested the Principal maam to not include a child with autism with the normal children. They argued that sometimes the child without autism also picks up the habits of the autistic child. At the same time, autistic child's parents frequently compare their child with others and complain to the school, regarding behaviour and academic achievement. Our children with autism perceive the world differently and have a deficit in cognitive skills, so have greater difficulty understanding what has been taught, and so should be considered differently.

It can be difficult for children with ASD to understand the concept of a group, or memorize with the alphabet and letters, and they have difficulty in communication (Bamicha & Drigas, 2022). Thus, it makes no sense for parents of a child with autism to have too high expectations and to fail to know the actual strengths and abilities of their child. This had led to conflict and cold relations with the teachers, and attitude of some school management personnel often further adds to the teachers' problems. Due to high pressure from the parents, the teachers often felt devalued and incapable, and struggled with the extra mental pressure. Sabita shared: *Some parents do the autism test but do not disclose it, and neither do they want us to talk about it. Other students with autism are receiving therapy, but parents never spoke about what sort of therapy the child is getting or disclose the medical issues associated with autism.* The cloak of secrecy and denial is unhelpful and further victimises the child with autism.

This sort of scenario puts pressure on the teachers to follow the general curriculum and activities regardless of the child's condition or needs. It pressurized the children to learn by hook or crook without considering the actual learning potential of a child. Sabita further narrated:

I have seen children being slapped and punished due to their behaviour, in the name of making them well disciplined, despite the lack of understanding of the autistic student. Even in my school, although I am not sure whether I should share this or not, but one of my students with autism was going home, and he just kept on opening the window again and again in the van - the van assistant pinched the child in the thigh and oh god, the parents were angry, and they threatened us with the police if we said anything. Later that matter was sorted out with official negotiation but these things happen in the school (14 November 2022).

Archana had a similar experience of her child with autism being bullied by their peers and other supporting staff.

In our later interviews, Sabita and Archana were also more able to share the dark side of their situation. Sabita was weeping when she shared how children with special needs were bullied by other students and the school-bus assistant. She shared that the acceptance level for a child was so important, and although she has been continuously counselling all the other students to accept the child with special needs, the child with special needs is often bullied when she is not around.

Campbell and Barger (2014) also revealed that though children have little awareness about autism, students with autism experience bullying and their chances of progress are often sabotaged due to their condition. The lack of communication and social skills in our child with autism puts them in a risk of abuse. Sabita admitted there is a need for this physical abuse to stop but added that the physical environment and the infrastructure needed to support the child with autism must be improved.

Roshani spoke of the need for greater awareness and orientation for all the key stakeholders. She said: *only proper orientation to, and awareness of all the key stakeholders can help to promote an inclusive, safe, supportive environment; however, it is not only the teachers' job, but also the classroom helpers, and other members of the school an educational establishment, as well as the parents, that need to accept and understand the child - and this is not happening.*

The foundation of lies, and misperceptions, is still strong. For the practice of inclusion to thrive, where a child with or without autism is safe and supported, collaboration is essential, as well as a positive attitude, and the support of all concerned, so that all children can reach their greatest potential (Frazier et. al., 2004).

Lack of Teachers' Support

Another major component that my participants exposed during their narratives is the lack of teacher support programmes in schools. Despite having positive attitudes towards teaching children with autism in their regular classrooms, the teachers all felt they lacked the necessary training and competency. There are a few essential components for supporting teachers to run smooth inclusive classrooms, such as appropriate curriculum designing, pedagogical insights and practices, and developing assessment tools (Lisdiana et. al., 2019).

All of my participants have more than 15 students in their classroom and yet they have been left to fend for themselves. For example, Parbati is mainly hired as a

shadow teacher, but has received virtually no training with regard to autism. During her three years of teaching experience she has not attended any extensive training on educating children with special needs. She attended a one-day training seminar, but pointed out, that this was far from sufficient. She said:

I have three children with autism at the moment and I am not getting any support from the school on how to run the classrooms. Neither am I allowed to ask anything to my colleagues nor seek professional help. I am just following the regular class activities and doing my best when students need support. I am referring to my use of information on the internet and you-tube - it is like I am working on a trial and error basis.

Parbati seemed so disturbed when outlining this point. She admitted the school where she is currently working is run by a highly educated team, but she still feels that she is not getting proper support from the team, and seeking help is stigmatized due to school owners and parent's beliefs about the autism.

The supporting attitude on helping the child with special needs in the inclusive setting is appreciable and one of the key components of a teacher who practices inclusion in the regular classroom (Ross-Hill, 2009) - while conversely, the lack of support can seriously disadvantage the autistic child in the classroom.

Ajita, Archana, Parbati, and Sabita also spoke of the need of a better child-teacher ratio as a way forward to improve the help provided to the child with special needs. Only Roshani's school provides Sundays as a day off to allow teachers to make plans and different activities. The ability of teachers to differentiate has been blurred due to the child teacher ratio; an improved child:teacher ratio is one of the effective components for improved inclusive practice (Lisdiana et al., 2019).

The four above participants all struggle with time management and proper planning issues. There is just not enough time, given the number of students they have. They have been given more than 15 students and more than one child with special needs, but provided with only the same amount of time to prepare their lesson plans and utilise other educational resources as the time provided to teachers who have no special needs students.

Sabita revealed that though she has got some training on educating children with autism, she is facing trouble due to the number of students she has in her class. She shared:

I am looking after 2 children with autism and another 17 normal students and it is very challenging in terms of classroom management. School management think that because I had some training I am capable of handling all these children. I would do better if I had only one child with autism, and had one assistant teacher. I am not being able to give enough time to all the children. I wish I could separately teach them. I need only one child with autism in my class.

Archana also claimed that considering all the responsibilities on her shoulders, it is more than one teacher can handle. She said:

In the classroom I have an autistic student and others with different abilities so it is very difficult without support and a well-equipped human resource. We referred one Down syndrome child last year to a special school, but now as well as an autistic student, I have a student with Cerebral palsy, though thankfully the class-room sister is helping her in her activities. I have not received any training on how to teach such a diverse group of children. I have studied the behaviour of children during these years and I have been designing teaching activities based on their behaviour, but that is not enough. Till today, I didn't even know who gives training on teaching children with autism. If I knew that, then I would definitely be interested in taking training in the future (14 November 2022).

To teach in an inclusive classroom educators are expected to have certain competencies such as understanding the nature of a child, and skills to run the classroom and knowledge of different pedagogical approaches (Borg et. al., 2011). Archana has an assistant teacher to support her and a classroom helper, but has not received any training to educate children with special needs. She is trying to build her teaching competency using her observation skills to educate children, though she is unsure as to the success of her learning outcomes or methods applied in the classroom.

Roshani had a different point of view on professional development. She claims that the education and training that teachers receive from the Nepali institutions is not reliable:

I pursued my master's degree in special needs education, but I have not gained any practical knowledge. The education which I gained just gave me

theoretical knowledge and that is the reason why I often travel abroad to update myself and get training.

Roshani is helping other teachers to have a better insight on autism and improve their teaching strategies; she continues to try and mentor other teachers, especially as she is not convinced by the content of the teacher training on this aspect in Nepal:

I think as a teacher the painful thing is not to be guided or mentored; if teachers receive help on how to teach in the inclusive setting, everything will be much better. I am happy to try and mentor and guide other teachers. I also focus on the importance of the collaboration between different stakeholders and on providing a safe environment for all the children, including those with autism.

She spoke of one particular child with autism:

I do not know what medical condition she had but she used to poop 3 times a day normally. I felt very exhausted having to look after her, every day for almost 6 months. It was energy draining. And sometimes your classroom assistant and helper are exhausted too.

She shared that the condition this child had should have been disclosed to all the stakeholders who work closely with the child.

These narratives show that teachers are not provided with adequate training or resources to deal with special needs children. They are simply expected to accommodate them in regular classrooms without any preparation or planning or extra focused training. Each special needs child is unique, and their teaching and behaviour management techniques require individualization. As teachers, they found it challenging, but they are doing what they can to help students to learn. Teachers' preparation, ongoing support and their own readiness is necessary to teach child with special needs in the regular classroom. They need to have the knowledge, attitude and skills (Rabi et. al., 2018), which, all of my participants agreed, was not forthcoming in Nepal.

There was a clear lack of support from the parents and school management to broaden their horizon to practice inclusion. They are making efforts on their own, and trying to develop and improve their own teaching techniques.

Unfortunately, despite their efforts, some parents still complain and others continue to compare their autistic child's progress to that of other students, which was

disheartening. Special needs students deserve the same opportunities and education as their peers, but it is important to provide teachers with adequate support and resources to ensure their success in an inclusive classroom.

Mental Pressure and Job Dissatisfaction

The low pay range in the teaching profession is another concern, especially when working with children who require special care. Educating children with autism requires practical knowledge, and much work and time put into helping them acquire basic motor skills. Once they acquire fine and gross motor skills, they can perform basic life skills, such as wiping their face, nose, toileting, and eating.

Ajita, Archana and Parbati, agreed teachers who work with ASD children deserve full credit, adequate remuneration, and as much support as possible. Parbati stated:

My salary is comparatively low in my circle. I am working as a shadow teacher, taking full responsibility of a child with autism, and sometimes when sister is not around I have to clean the potty of a child. Some children are so obsessed with me; they want me to be around as their personal care taker. I never get leave, and my pay is low.

The payment range for an early childhood educator in the private sector is diverse. All five of the participants in this study, are earning in the range of Rs. 16,000 to Rs. 25,000. Parbati and Sabita sometimes feel that their motivation has gone down due to the poor pay, as the pressure they experience from their work is not aligned with the remuneration they receive from the school. Ganta points out that motivation is very important to a teacher. The motivation and its relationship to the work they do, and the productivity of an employee has a direct linkage with the quality of work (Ganta, 2014).

Special care teachers have so much on their plate. The high level of stress to address the needs of the child and the extra workloads impact on the mental wellbeing of my research participants; dissatisfaction from the poor pay range has created more vulnerable situations (Gray et al., 2017). Most of the participants of this study are expected to wear various hats as a teacher, mother, care-taker, counsellor, friend and usher despite the minimal salary, and this often makes them think they would be better off switching jobs or working in a regular class where no special needs children have been enrolled.

Roshani, however, has a different opinion on it; she considers the financial aspect in a different way:

I was earning triple and four times more before than I am now, but at the moment I am just doing this work to benefit society. I have a son I must help, and I need to raise the voices of those less fortunate – as a result, I have to be in this profession. I am lucky that I have a secondary source of income as well, but I agree that the Government needs to pay teachers more, because our job is really tough.

The variation on the facilities and remuneration are key factors that concern teachers. As Sabita explained:

I took 15 days of training on teaching children with autism and helping them learning in a regular classroom. I paid for my training – the school has not given a penny to cover this. I did the training during the term break, otherwise I wouldn't be able to attend school. I have noticed that the school provides workshops and sessions for teacher training that are not about differentiated instruction. Most of my friends have attended training from the Early Childhood Education Centre which was funded by the school authority - whereas I have never been given this sort of opportunity. Teachers need regular up-skilling; in the classroom every day, I encounter new challenges and I feel bad when my salary is not enough to allow me attend other workshops that might be helpful (14 November 2022).

In short, to enhance or update her skills, Sabita is not getting any financial support from her school, and on her salary, she cannot afford the relevant courses on her own. This has made her increasingly despondent, and she hinted at the prospect of having to switch to a class from the next session where she will only teach normal students.

All of my participants agreed their workload is too great, and admitted that, with regard to the autistic children, teaching small things such as manners, the basics of language skills, pre-writing and pre-reading activities have to be given priority before academic activities. The need for continuous assessment, along with providing equal participation in Montessori lab activities, demand the teacher makes different plans for children with special needs. In short, they are been left behind. Roshani, Parbati, and Archana all have different syllabuses for their special needs children. Parbati and Sabita, teach special needs children using a regular syllabus, but with

modified techniques such as additional work-books and activities. All of them are concerned for the academic skills of their autistic children, and worry about their performance in the next grade exams, due in a few months.

They are struggling with big expectations, limited time, and a low salary. In his paper, Khatri (2022) explored societal phenomena of the low pay range for female teachers who work in pre-primary level in the Kathmandu Valley; he found that the low pay remuneration to the teachers was a matter of deep concern for all the teachers, both from the gender perspective and from the class expectations. Ultimately, it seems we have a long way to go to provide an adequate supportive environment for children with autism to help them achieve their full potential, as well as adequately supporting their teachers.

Reflecting through a Theoretical Perspective

This chapter has described teachers' challenges based upon the reality of inclusion. The challenges faced by teachers were discussed, along with the impairments of their ASD students, and the lack of support and parent's misperceptions or unrealistic expectations were listed as key barriers to inclusive education. In the process, I have discussed the lack of teachers support and the struggling perspectives of the participants. Most importantly, the last theme of mental pressure and job dissatisfaction were shown to have a knock-on effect on the motivation and retention of teachers in the educational system.

In Figure 4, I have documented the major challenges facing the teachers of autistic children in an inclusive classroom.

Figure 4

Visual of a Mind Map on Challenges



From a theoretical perspective, there is initially the social constructivist theory, which emphasizes the role of social interactions and shared experiences in shaping individuals' understanding and knowledge. In this context, the challenges faced by teachers in promoting inclusion can be seen as a result of the complex social interactions between teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders in the educational system (Jamero, 2019). According to the social constructivist theory, knowledge is constructed through collaborative interactions among individuals with different perspectives and experiences. In the case of inclusive education, teachers are required to collaborate with students, parents, and other teachers to create an inclusive learning environment that accommodates the diverse needs of all learners. However, in our scenario, inclusion is not happening due to the barriers portrayed in the figure (Salend, 2011). Teachers face several challenges in the teaching and learning process, including lack of support from the authorities, unrealistic expectations from parents, and mental pressure.

Overall, there are complex social interactions and challenges involved in promoting inclusive education. From a social constructivist perspective, the

challenges faced by teachers can be seen as a result of the collaborative interactions between individuals with different perspectives and experiences. To overcome these challenges, it is important to provide adequate support and resources for teachers, as well as promoting collaborative approaches that acknowledge the diverse needs of all learners.

CHAPTER VII

TEACHERS' JOURNEY TOWARDS DEVELOPING A COPING MECHANISM

In the previous chapter I articulated different themes of challenges faced by the teachers involved in educating autistic children. The major challenges were understanding the culture of autism and the current lack of support and resources in Nepalese schools. In this chapter, I have explored the teachers coping mechanisms when dealing with the regular and current challenges that they have been facing. It fully addresses my third research question: How teachers coping with the challenges that they are facing in the regular classroom?

How do ECD educators cope with the challenges they face in the regular classroom? Most of the teachers are still sharing that they are in dire need of professional support, but are trying not to break the learning rights of the autistic child and coping with difficult situations through self-exploration, positive support from colleagues when available, engagement with different key stakeholders, understanding the child as well as possible, and maintaining well-being of the child and within the classroom. Teachers have accepted the responsibility of educating and nurturing young learners equally and being supportive to all students, and have adopted a few coping strategies to help learners' gain academic skills as well as improve their social skills and holistic development. In this chapter, I have incorporated five major strategic themes which my participants are practising to cope with their challenges.

The five themes include teachers' professional development through which teachers can acquire knowledge and skills for educating all children, most importantly children with autism; the support from the school authority, parents, other colleagues inside the school and awareness amongst learners; student centred educational interventions; the well-being of the teachers and practicing mindfulness, emphasized by Roshani, my fourth participant, during the last theme talks; and teacher's envisioning of the future classroom. All these are important coping strategies that teachers must apply.

Teachers develop these coping strategies according to the hurdles and problems that they face inside the classroom (Rajesh et. al., 2022); my participants too

have developed their own coping strategies to overcome the challenges they are currently facing.

Teachers' Preparation and Professional Development

All my participants narrated that the teaching profession requires constant updates, as they face new challenges in the classroom, and have to build resilience to cope with any challenges. Every classroom has students from diverse backgrounds and of varied learning needs, and my participants are trying to address their learners needs by adapting lessons learnt from various organizations, as well as self-study and research. They prepare themselves for the class by reading articles provided on the internet; some of them are also attending webinars and seminars, and some are seeking help from skilled educators – all of which indicate that the teachers are taking personal preparation seriously (Simpson, 2004). Teaching children with ASD requires specific training and preparation to ensure that they receive the best education possible. Professional development is crucial for teachers to learn how to effectively work with these children and create a positive impact on their lives (Berry et. al., 2011). Awareness of autism and how to teach these children needs to be understood by the teacher as a first step, as teaching children with ASD requires a different approach than teaching regular students (Leach & Duffy, 2009). When I started teaching, I was informed initially of my job role and my responsibilities; years passed, and the dynamism in the education field and my encounter with various colleagues and researchers led me to further enhance my teaching career through teacher's professional development.

In this regard, Ajita, my first participant, shared that:

I do not have specific training to teach children with autism but I am myself studying various training materials uploaded onto the internet, I also refer to many videos on YouTube and sometimes I ask my friend who is psychologist on how to handle particular behavioural issues. On the basis of these and my own experience, I design different sets of plans to meet the need of students who need special attention (1 December 2022).

The uses of information technologies to acquire knowledge and sharpen the skills to teach in an inclusive classroom is what she is practising here (Geladze, 2015). She is using the internet to understand certain teaching techniques within a differentiated instruction system that was present in her classroom. The tailored activities for children with ASD to cope with academic activities is practised in the

form of differentiated instruction (Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020). Ajita's narrative indicated that the assistance of experts was the scaffolding for her to practise inclusion inside her classroom. The activities she was designing was engaging for all the learners and also suited to the child with autism, and she further emphasized on the developing of resources according to the needs of specific academic content for each group of children. *I used to provide the same educational resources for all the children, but nowadays I am using picture cut-outs and pictorial materials such as flash cards more; the way I used to give instruction has changed over the years.* The lack of resources for the ASD children can make it difficult for students to engage in learning, which is why it's important to have a variety of resources tailored to their specific disabilities; Ajita is acquiring learning materials from the internet and with the help of experts.

Like Ajita, Parbati also refers to the internet to understand and educate her students in the classroom. She shared that: *without internet I wouldn't have as many ideas to teach these ASD students - you-tube videos are the best source of knowledge and I adapt my teaching method accordingly.*

The internet has provided tremendous opportunities for teachers to gather resources which they use to run their classrooms effectively. Parbati in her classroom is using the same teaching content and resources to teach child with and without autism, but online educational content and resources have helped her to prepare tailored worksheets depending on the needs of each child. She is also referring to internet sources to tackle behavioural challenges and the sensory needs of the special needs child.

Teachers need to be trained to tackle sensory needs and use a positive behaviour approach to ensure that children with ASD have a comfortable and enjoyable learning experience (Murray et. al., 2009). Enjoying the diversity within the classroom is crucial for teaching children with and without autism. Sabita believes that teachers must understand the nature of the child and enjoy working with them - but before enrolling any child, both teacher staff and the school administration both have to do the necessary homework on the child, such as preparation for the educational and lesson plans, the need for specific class-activities, and the appropriate mode of assessment. When I asked her coping strategies, Sabita responded that teachers' preparation and preparedness was for her the solution and termed it as 'the teacher's readiness for the classroom'. The preparation helps to focus on solutions

rather than problems, and adds that the value of patience is crucial in order to work successfully with children who may seek special attention from the teachers. On coping strategies, she shared:

Awareness of autism and how to teach these children needs to be understood by the teacher first. Teachers' professional development has always helped me to deal with children, especially with the child with autism. I am glad that we have a culture of teachers' readiness period, where the school authorities prepare us initially. All the level teachers and block co-ordinators gather together and guide us to make future plans. Many times I had a classroom management problem, but the weekly meetings and other general meetings with the school co-ordinators and principal is an amazing platform to express your problems and issues that you have faced inside the classroom - and we come up with the solutions (6 December 2022).

In Sabita's school, she has been practising teachers' readiness sessions, as well as a few follow-up discussion meetings with the school stakeholders. The school is continuously working on the remedial teaching, and runs support classes for all students who need special support, not only for children with ASD. Teachers are prepared to cope with all classroom challenges which is much easier when assistance from each other is willingly available. The role of professional development is to implant knowledge along with skills to practice full inclusion in the classroom (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). When teachers are open and willing, they can be trained to tailor the curriculum to meet learner's specific needs. In the regular classroom, some students will not be up to the same standard as their peers in terms of their learning abilities. The support from other teachers are needed in the classroom to ensure that each child receives the attention and care they need to succeed.

Roshani had different point of view on teachers' preparation and professional development. She focuses on the competency of the teachers. She narrated:

My willingness to help children with special need is crucial factor, and it derives from the self-motivation. Being a mother to an autistic child, I see teachers' self-preparation as the crucial aspect for an inclusive classroom. Hence I always get ready to deal with problems and run the class more smoothly with the help of better preparation both in terms of my class plan and my own knowledge. I prepare myself as per the situation, the need and the

time available – however, basic foundation of theoretical knowledge has always added value to my teaching journey (8th December, 2022).

Roshani seemed to be well-prepared in terms of her teaching plan, and she has been spending much time over the past few years on preparing plans and making resources which can assist her with ASD children (Scheuermann et. al., 2003). She further added:

I always do critical self-reflection on my teaching practises, which helps you to figure out where the problem lies and see the nuances. If I am giving any activities in the classroom and it is not happening the way it was supposed to, then I change the pattern of the activity, on the basis of what is wrong and how can our children better and more equally participate again? These sort of questions are always on my mind - and I plan accordingly.

Roshani is a dedicated special needs educator, and she has been continuously reflecting on her teaching practice. With the help of reflective practices, she is able to understand the specific needs of her children in the classroom and better prepare for her next class. As Ward and McCotter (2004) have stated, the reflective habits of teachers helped them to look into their teaching practise for further improvement. She has been utilizing her academic knowledge combined with her teaching skills and experience, and trying to mitigate the gap between theory and practise with the help of self-reflection on her own teaching process.

My teacher participants are all preparing themselves to run inclusive classrooms by gaining theoretical knowledge from the internet, and some of them are seeking help from other colleagues and from experts. It shows that they have devoted themselves to positive teaching and researching in order to make their classrooms more inclusive. Through self-motivation and the help of ICT, they have involved themselves in training and collaborating, which has assisted them to gain the knowledge and confidence to educate child with and without autism in regular classrooms (Toran et al., 2016). Parbati who does not have any specific formal training is able to enhance her knowledge and skills through attending various free webinars, watching you-tube videos and practising inclusivity in her classroom. Ajita, Archana and Sabita have also been utilizing their time very wisely to prepare plans and teaching-learning aids, and most of the time they stay late in the school to make classroom plans and design their activities. Sabita narrated that: *I personally stayed quiet long in school to make plans, and design and arrange activity materials.* This is

the same scenario for other participants as well, in contrast to Roshani who is given Sunday off to prepare her weekly lessons; in her school, Sunday is always allocated for teachers' professional development and interactions with other teachers.

Analysing the participants' experiences and encounters with autistic children and the current teaching practices, indicates that the participants had no or very little or erroneous prior knowledge about autism despite some of them already having several years of experience in the teaching profession. Besides Roshani, who is a trained special needs educator, they have built their own coping strategies over the years based on their own experience. All of them are preparing the course activities and reforming the pedagogical approaches depending on the needs of each specific child. Ajita, Archana, Sabita and Parbati revealed that they had some misconceptions about children with ASD during their initial phase of teaching. Roshani also revealed that she struggled with a high functioning child with ASD in her regular classroom, but received assistance in coping from developing an IEP and other intervention approaches, and from help provided by the parents and more experienced experts. Roshani and Sabita both took training on educating children with ASD, which resulted in them practising evidence-based teaching and learning methodologies in their regular inclusive classrooms, more structured teaching, and fully routine-based activities for example. In conclusion, my teacher participants are coping through a variety of means and solutions, including with their own self preparation strategies (Simpson, 2004). Roshani is a trained special needs educator which helped her to adopt different pedagogical interventions in her classroom. All the efforts by the participant teachers in my research have made significant self-motivated efforts to improve their understanding and knowledge of autism which is essential for teaching autistic children in regular inclusive classrooms. This a significant challenge when the goal is to not compromise other children's learning potentials, and needs the assistance of other teachers, and time to utilize the internet to add value to their professional development with the aim of educating all children with the best learning opportunities.

Engagement in the Context and Process with Teachers, Parents, and Students

Inclusive educational practices demand collaboration from different key stakeholders such as interactions between teachers to teachers, teachers to parents, parents to children, teachers to school administration, teachers to community, teachers to non-teaching staff (Hornby, 2014). The perceptions and the current scenario on the

collaboration between context and process has been elaborated in Chapter V - however in this theme, I have analysed the narratives for the ways concerning how my participants are coping with the challenges they have been facing in the regular classroom. My first participant, Ajita said:

Everyone's role is important in creating an inclusive classroom environment, everyone's uniqueness must be celebrated, and I am focusing on working with the individual differences of students with the help of the parents. Not all the parents are positive but some of them are really helpful. At the same time, I am also receiving support from the school principal to plan my activities. I am lucky as I get support from my school leader (1 December 2022).

Even in parent meetings, collaboration between the parents and the in-school staff is essential in providing the best education for students, including those with ASD (Olsson & Nilholm, 2023). In parent meetings, teachers need to explain to parents of typical students how our students with ASD are learning empathy and family values from other students and help needs to be provided by helping each other. Sabita narrated:

We are working collaboratively, because I think one autistic child is equivalent to an entire school, and his behaviour, his presence can shake the reputation of school. The school head is accepting the child no matter from what background child comes from and we all have to try to provide the necessary support. Our current principal Maam does the day to day communication with the parents – such as how the child is feeling, what is his condition at home – and each and every small detail is shared. I frequently shared what had happened in school - good things, bad things, everything - to know the child better and to ensure we make progress. At the same time, I admire the role of the classroom helper because toileting, feeding, and working inside the classroom, although basic, are the most significant things for the pre-schoolers (6 December 2022).

However, according to Sabita, children with ASD often used to miss out on school field trips and extracurricular activities due to their behaviour problems. This is a scenario of exclusion when the learning environment does not meet the need of children with special needs (Salend, 2011). To address this, communication between parents and teachers is crucial to ensure that the parents can provide the necessary support at home and positive changes in their child's behaviour are observed. It is

essential that parents share information about their child before enrolling in school and for any previous class teacher to provide information. Collaboration between teachers from different classrooms and the school management is also important in providing the necessary support for teachers and preparing individual education programmes for each student (Bateman et. al., 2022). Roshani, the special needs educator, had an additional point of view - she shared:

At the moment, I think I am well supported by the other colleagues in the school, I am just a teacher and we are learning from one another. I am allowed to go and take courses and upgrade my skills, and then I support other teachers. And then other teachers are supported by me. The teachers of special needs children need to have great support from the school's different stakeholders (8 December 2022).

In conclusion, collaboration and understanding the challenging nature of teaching children with ASD is essential in providing the best education for these students (Bricker et. al., 2022). Communication between parents and teachers, individual care and support, and the preparation of individual education programmes are necessary to help these students succeed.

Student Centric Pedagogical Intervention

Understanding and accommodating the unique needs of children with autism requires patience, empathy, and creativity (Widianti et. al., 2018). Parbati shared that: *in one case, it took almost six months to understand a new child with autism in my class.* With the help of a trained teacher who had worked before with autistic children and using reinforcement techniques such as offering popcorn, the child gradually became comfortable participating in classroom activities.

However, according to her, there were still challenges such as the child's refusal to eat in the dining hall. The teacher gained the child's trust and gradually introduced her to the dining hall by letting her eat her favourite popcorn at the dining table. It is important to understand and accommodate each child's individual needs and make adjustments to their routine to help them feel comfortable in the classroom (Muñoz, 2020).

Ajita stated that: *I designed the academic activities as per the needs of the child, but I am also seeking help and guidance from other teachers. I do follow up activities to check whether they have learnt the concept or not.* Teaching academic subjects to children with autism can be challenging due to variations in concentration,

focus, and lack of stability (Cahyo Adi Kistoro et al., 2021), and it is difficult to know whether they are truly learning or just mimicking. Ajita has been seeking help from others and using extra resources and skilled human resources to help the children with autism in her classroom. Sabita shared that: *I am creating a supportive environment where all the learners in my classroom can learn.* Creating a supportive environment in the classroom is important for all students, including those with autism (Olsson & Nilholm, 2023). Teachers' encouragement, respect and understanding reminds the students of the unique needs of their classmates with autism, and helps to promote inclusivity and cope with the challenges teacher faced in the classroom (Alamos Reyes, 2022). It is important to look beyond the behavioural problems and focus on understanding the child's nature to create a plan that addresses their specific needs while keeping in mind the needs of the other learners in the classroom.

Rohani stated that: *being the lead teacher in my class and having extra school responsibilities requires the need for an extra teacher, extra resources, and a prepared IEP to know each child's nature; this helps me to engage with all the students.* Roshani finds creative ways to engage children with autism and accommodate their unique needs, such as offering a physical touch or a particular type of interaction with the child. Ultimately, understanding and accommodating the needs of children with autism can create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students (Andrade, 2022).

Mental Well-being

All my participants show concern on the mental well-being of the teachers, students, parents and other key stakeholders who work collaboratively with the child with autism in the regular classroom. Roshani took it as a crucial aspect of overall health, and narrated:

It is stressful to look after a child with autism and other students at a same time, the behaviour issues and other work pressure is hard to manage.

However, in my school, and at home also, I have been working on my mental health, reflection, ensuring I get enough sleep and proper mental workouts, and I spend my off-duty time to refresh myself.

She talks about the mental well-being of both teachers and parents, and she is managing it with the practice of self-care in order to be mentally fit to educate children with autism (Arastaman & Cetinkaya, 2022). On a similar note, another participant Parbati also revealed that: *it is very difficult to maintain inner peace*

sometimes, but I am lucky as I have another teacher who mentored me, and I take her support and she give me counselling when I am stressed. She has been guided by her co-teacher, who helps her to make classroom plans and to design the activities; she is taking support from her colleague to overcome the mental fatigue she faces in the school (Drescher & Chang, 2022). She considers herself lucky as she receives continuous counselling and support from her colleague.

Sabita also shared:

I do not have an assistant teacher, and the work pressure I am having is massive. I am giving my extra time, even in the break time I personally do something with my children. I am good with managing my time and we have meditation and yoga time every day in the school - I do this with my students, and this lessen my stress.

For her, the greatest coping strategy lies in time management for her plans; being a single teacher of an inclusive classroom, she speaks of the value of meditation for her and her students (Bidi et. al., 2023) - she practises meditation and yoga every day for all the students to reduce the level of stress.

Ajita had different point of view on coping with mental stress, and shared:

I think I focus more on the strength of my child and celebrate each and every small achievement of my children. This makes me happy and other learners as well. This kills all my tiredness and revives my energy, as at least the children are showing some progress in their learning. I hope all parents do this as well.

She focuses on the victory of the child's achievements, and this also gives the child a sense of achievement and encouragement. Her strategy not only supports the child with special needs, it also helps to develop positive relationships between teacher and students and student to student as well. The collaborative nature of Ajita's classroom is a lively example of appreciating and celebrating the student's achievements (Prasetyo et. al., 2021). Ajita also suggested that parents should do the same to motivate their children.

Archana is also practising self-awareness, and reported that: *I have other children who are differently able – earlier in my teaching career, I used to be scared by seeing these children, and had very negative perceptions, but now I am aware and try to understand the child and get to know them. I practise empathy which makes me feel loved, and try to show my unconditional love towards my children. I do not feel awkward or burdened these days. I feel happy that I am able to understand them (1*

December 2022). Archana here talked about the social stigma of including child with special need in the regular classroom; to reduce this stigma, she has been practising to become self-aware of the child and try to become more empathetic towards all children in her classroom - and this is giving her inner pleasure and happiness (Kayama et al., 2019).

All the participants shared ideas on the advantages of keeping mentally at peace and being fresh by practising various mind relaxing techniques in order to be able to properly educate the children with special needs in their classrooms. All of them appreciated the parental support they received which helps to maintain the mental wellbeing of teachers and students. All of them also have different coping strategies - the mental well-being of the teachers, parents and the students is crucial in promoting a positive learning environment in an inclusive classroom.

Envision of Teachers Future Classroom

My five research participants all envision their future inclusive classroom as run with much collaboration and major inputs from trained medico-educational staff, as their narrations have conveyed.

Ajita narrated:

I envision a classroom of students with full inclusion, where teachers are not sent directly into the classroom without preparation, where teachers are oriented and are fully aware of what they are supposed to do in the classroom, and are full with positivity and motivation for educating young minds. And I also expect that the parents work collaboratively with the school (9 March 2023).

She is hoping for a classroom where teachers are well trained and well prepared and have a positive working attitude to educating children in an inclusive classroom. She feels that a strong collaboration with both parents and the school authorities is essential.

Archana sees her future classroom as follows:

I envision a classroom where we are aware of the background of all children, including their behaviour; where the teachers are vigilant because you never know when an incident might take place - a behaviour issue for example, which is something I have seen in the classroom; where the parents happily accept diversity; where no-one is misled or misguided by so-called societal dogmas. A good collaboration between teachers, parents and the school, and

mutual respect towards one another is very important, and the school head should look into how the class teacher is practicing the inclusive setting in the classroom. I envisage a classroom where teachers believe in the child's capacity and strengths, rather than focusing on his or her weakness (9 March 2023).

She sees a classroom where awareness amongst teachers on autism is prevalent, and where all the professionals working with the children are able to understand the behaviour issues exhibited by the children, and a society where acceptance is prevalent. She also emphasizes on the role of school leaders to provide proper support and training, and undertake serious and regular monitoring to ensure that genuinely inclusive classrooms are maintained.

Sabita narrated the following:

I envision the inclusive classroom as one where open and transparent conversations between teacher and parents take place regularly on topics such as child's health, food preferences, their habits and behaviour; a classroom where teachers are valued and prepared to experience and learn from the children. I wish that future schools will be filled with the required and appropriate resource materials essential for making an inclusive classroom function properly (10 March 2023).

Sabita envisioned such a classroom in order to fulfil the needs of diverse children, and focuses on open communication with the parents and other stakeholders on the background of a child. On the same aspect, Roshani shared:

I believe the inclusive classroom has to be well-settled with enough learning resources for all children, and proper support being provided with proper awareness so that the teacher's attitude is good to nurture the children (11 March 2023).

Roshani also wants more support for a teacher to ensure that the teacher has a positive attitude to teach in inclusive settings.

Parbati shared: *I also visualize on a future situation where teachers who work in inclusive classrooms have a good reputation and a pay range of teachers and assistants which is properly related to their efforts and hard work (12 March 2023).*

This recognizes the need for improved levels of respect and financial remuneration for teachers working with special needs children in inclusive classrooms.

All of them see themselves in an inclusive classroom in future providing that they are offered the necessary training, support, and care, and proper recognition from the school, parents and the community. The participants also showed concern on the growing population of special needs children in future regular classrooms, which demands immediate planning and action in order to properly prepare teachers joining the educational sector in the future to have all necessary components in place.

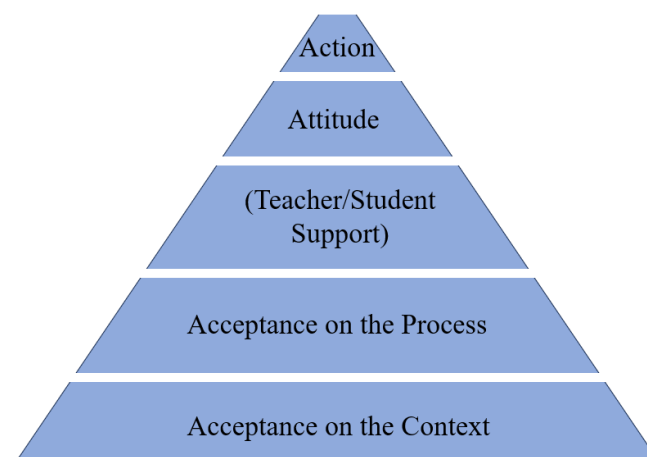
Reflecting through a Theoretical Perspective

From the perspective of social constructivism, this chapter has highlighted the coping strategies used by teachers to address the challenges they face in implementing inclusive education. The teacher participants have actively gained knowledge through social interactions and experiences, and they have sought out professional development opportunities and used technology to gain knowledge and awareness about inclusion (Mwendo, 2011).

The theory of inclusive education emphasizes the importance of addressing the diverse needs of all students (Salend, 2011). The student-centric pedagogical interventions mentioned in this chapter demonstrate how teachers are implementing strategies to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. Furthermore, the focus on building awareness and knowledge of inclusion shows the commitment of teachers towards creating an inclusive classroom (Polat, 2011).

Figure 5

Coping Strategies to Tackle Challenges in Inclusive Classrooms



Building Strategies to Cope with Challenges

From the perspective of the theory of autism, this chapter has also discussed the challenges faced by teachers in meeting the needs of students with autism. Teachers need to be aware of the specific needs of their students with autism and have the necessary resources and support to meet those needs (Dellis et al., 2017).

In this Chapter, I have explored teachers coping strategies to overcome challenges they are facing currently. All my participants remain hopeful that they will receive much improved support from the schools in terms of their professional development. Teachers have shared that with the help of ICT, they have been working on improving their awareness and knowledge of both autism and inclusion in their teaching journey, and the student centric pedagogical intervention and the skills that teachers are practising to address the diverse need of students is discussed. To overcome regular mental stress in these inclusive classrooms, the participants speak freely about building strategies to reduce the level of stress - some of them practise mindfulness, yoga, and meditation to release the pressure they have experienced in their schools and classrooms. The envisioned future classrooms presented at the end of this chapter provides a resume from all the teachers on a classroom where their needs are much better fulfilled.

CHAPTER VIII INSIGHTS, CONCLUSION, AND REFLECTION

This chapter is the conclusions and implication of my research about teacher's experiences when including children with autism in regular classrooms. Furthermore, this chapter focuses on the challenges early childhood educators face in the classroom, and the practical coping strategies which they develop to tackle the hurdles and challenges that they experience in the classroom. The teaching journey of my participants, their first perceptions and early encounters with autism and their current practices and experiences are explored here.

In this thesis, I have presented the stories of teachers who are teaching young children with autism in their regular classrooms. Although the policies and laws of Nepal enshrines equal access to the child with special needs in regular schools, it is clearly evident that the teacher's preparation, their training and professional development has been overlooked in regards to inclusive practises. I argue that despite the many challenges, the multiple coping strategies, which my participants have developed and are applying to make their classroom more inclusive, could be much enhanced if they received improved training and more educational and societal collaboration.

During the inclusion of children with autism in regular classrooms, early childhood educators face numerous academic, social, communication and behavioural challenges in their teaching journey from the very beginning of the inclusion process. All of us are advocates for inclusive education, but for four of my participants (except Roshani) found that inclusivity itself was a very challenging task without basic awareness on autism and appropriate training, which resulted in the teachers being poorly prepared. This chapter discusses why the teachers are disempowered by the education system, the school authorities and the parents and do not meet optimal standards for promoting inclusive practices. I have discussed how the basic collaboration between teachers, parents and school authorities failed to help teachers to understand the culture of autism which creates exclusion in terms of the autistic child and bad experiences for all stakeholders; in addition, it exacerbated mental pressure for teachers. This study illustrates my participants teaching experiences, their

inspirational factors to become a teacher, and their journeys in relation to children with autism and without autism in regular classrooms.

The narration of my participants reveal how they have been teaching all the children without discrimination which is a challenge in the regular classroom. For this the framework of Clandinin and Connelly (2004) for exploring into narratives has been followed. The stories of my five participants are specific to their own experiences, and the narratives and this study will help pre-service and in-service teachers, parents, as well as school administrators, policy makers and planners, to be better prepared to serve teachers and prepare classroom scenarios to improve the incorporation of special needs children into the regular classroom.

When comparing my research with previous work, the majority of the points that I make agree with previous literature findings; however, the unique social-cultural aspects of Nepal have held people back in accepting special children in the classroom, even when parents and teachers are from educated backgrounds. I also present arguments concerning the mental well-being of all the stakeholders who work closely with the child – this a key element in firstly accepting, and then including the autistic child in our regular school system.

Responding to my Research Questions

In the beginning, I had incorporated just one research question which related to my simply collecting in-depth narratives from my research participants on their teaching experiences. Having collected the interview materials from all my five participants in which they presented their views, perceptions, experiences, challenges and coping strategies, I formulated four research questions, as documented below, based on what I heard from my participants.

1. How do early childhood educators narrate their experiences of educating children with autism spectrum disorder in regular classrooms?
2. How do teachers perceive and practice inclusion in the regular classroom?
3. What are the challenges of including children with autism and how are these teachers coping with the challenges that they are facing in the regular classroom?

I have followed the interpretive paradigm for my research which I followed rigorously: for example, frequent visits and interaction with my participants, listening to and hearing their stories, giving them the assurance of confidentiality. The method of narrative inquiry helped me to provide full space to my research participants to

present their views, insights, ideas and opinions. This research has revealed the unheard pain of teachers and their voices which they have been raising for more help, and for better facilities before entering into the classroom.

The answer to my first research question is that they all had misconceptions regarding autism in the beginning, and that after teaching regularly for a while, they had to adapt, change their perceptions and make changes in their teaching strategies after enrolling a child with autism into the regular classroom. All of them maintain that they are having a joyful teaching experience, strongly support inclusivity, but the experience is sometimes very challenging due to lack of strong professional support. The experiences that they have gained from their current classroom situations has helped them to form an image of inclusive classrooms where the primary level of inclusion is the basis for teachers' teaching experiences.

In the current classroom environment of my five participants, they are teaching all the children, both typical and special needs, and some of them have adapted individual educational plans and practise differentiated instruction. However, due to challenging behaviour inside the classroom, the participants reported that, many times, the children with autism faced bullying from classmates, and also sometimes from the non-teaching staff of the school.

The second research question revealed that the teachers' perception of including children with autism in regular classroom has changed during their careers. Initially the perceptions were often based on societal misunderstandings, lack of awareness, information and proper training; although cultural and societal perceptions will take a long time to rectify, the lack of awareness and proper training are faults with the educational system. As inclusion of special needs children is guaranteed in government policies and inscribed in the law of Nepal, it is not acceptable that government approved training courses do not include awareness programmes and accurate information concerning autism, for example, in the teacher training curricula at authorised colleges. My participants all made their own impressive and concerted efforts to learn more about autism from world wide web sources, senior colleagues, school administrators, and educational and mental health specialists – and thus their perceptions changed as their careers progressed. Equally important in changing perceptions was information provided by parents, who play a key role in supporting the education of the autistic child and can significantly influence the teachers' classroom teaching methodologies.

The last research question unfolds the challenges that teachers faced due to issues such as poor communication and socialization, and testing behaviour of the children with autism. The challenges are greater when the parents of “normal” children and parents of autistic children blame each other and do not cooperate with either the concerned teacher or the school authority. The coping strategies which they have shared must in future be part of the normal teachers’ professional development which will better equip the teachers to follow differentiated instruction in the classroom. In addition, it is crucial that the awareness of parents of both “normal” and children with autism are enhanced in relation to autism, and this is equally important for other school staff. Teaching autistic children within an inclusive classroom is sometimes exhausting, and all teachers need to practise mindfulness to avoid burn out and mental health problems. All of my participants accepted that collaboration between all stakeholders was an essential key to improving the education of students with and without autism in regular settings.

Methodological Insights

This is my first time preparing a thesis, thus I have had little experience of producing a long research report. With the help and guidance of my Professor and other senior mentors, my original ideas and methodology evolved slowly from an initial blur into a body of work with more structure, a better understanding of the methods of qualitative study, and the means through which to conduct a narrative inquiry for my MPhil dissertation. The theoretical class on research that I received from my university assisted me a great deal in better understanding the parameters of my research, my participants, and the means through which to maintain ethical considerations throughout the research. I remember my first interview with participant one – it could have gone so much better; when I asked her to tell her stories, she panicked - what stories should she be telling and how to start it? Later on, I reflected on my own *modus operandi*, and understood that was not the correct way to begin the task of obtaining data from the participants. I developed a new approach with a strong introduction and explanation of my goals, and a commitment to confidentiality. As a result, the data was successfully collected through rigorous open interviews, follow up interviews, phone communications, and online meetings. I listened closely to the voices of my participants and the emotions that they divulged, which were especially revealing at their place of work. When the relationships between myself and the participants grew closer and more trusting, we later choose public spaces away from

the schools to meet – here, after further assurance of confidentiality of the research, my participants were able to talk more openly about their perceptions, experiences, feelings, and hopes for the future.

The mistakes that I made in the beginning were rectified by my supervisor and other mentors, who guided me to follow a more appropriate interview protocol while staying in the principles of narrative inquiry – this advice helped me to build the confidence of the participants and make them feel more comfortable. In addition, I took detailed field notes on the narratives and my own personal reflections after each meeting and interview, which helped me to discover why my participants were forming certain ideas and reaching conclusions in terms of perceptions of autism and teaching approaches.

My role in shaping the methodology of this narrative inquiry research began with critical decisions concerning the selection of participants, the modality of data collection, and the means of data analysis and for the interpretation of the findings. I was constantly attentive to the ethical considerations related to collecting and using the personal stories of my participants, and repeatedly obtained their informed consent and assured them that I would maintain confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study.

During data collection, the appropriate methods for collecting data were carefully chosen and developed. For the interviews, I created guideline questions and follow-up prompting questions to stimulate rich and detailed stories from the participants. During data analysis, I developed a systematic process for coding and interpreting the narratives. I worked on identifying themes, patterns, and connections within the data and used them to construct a coherent narrative that properly represented the participants' experiences. I finalized the narrative inquiry research by engaging in a reflexive process of interpretation, critically reflecting on my own assumptions and biases, and ensuring that I remained transparent and true to my participants' narratives in the shaping of the final research report.

Conclusions

Based on the narratives of the participants in this study, it is clear that inclusion of children with autism in regular classrooms presents significant challenges for the teachers. Some teachers' initial negative perceptions and misconceptions towards autism can sometimes create barriers to effective inclusion. Additionally, the not uncommon lack of support from parents, limited professional development

opportunities, and the pressure of high expectations from parents and assessment systems creates a stressful and challenging environment for teachers.

However, there are coping strategies, sometimes developed by teachers themselves that child educators can utilize to overcome these challenges. These strategies include student-centred pedagogical interventions, the use of information and communication technology to enhance and increase knowledge and awareness of autism and inclusion, and mindfulness practices to reduce stress and improve mental well-being. It is important for all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and non-teaching community members, to work together to promote a positive and inclusive environment in the classroom. Moreover, all members of the school, including all the support staff such as teaching assistants, drivers, chowkidars, kitchen staff – all of whom contribute to a welcoming and positive educational experience - require information on the aims of the inclusive classroom, on autism, the behavioural issues that might arise, and the necessary coping strategies.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of addressing the mental well-being of all individuals involved in the process of incorporating autistic children in the inclusive classroom – and this includes the mental health not just of the teachers and their assistants, but of the students and parents as well. By prioritizing mental health and well-being, we can create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students, including those with autism.

To make a classroom more inclusive, it is essential to have a student-centric pedagogical approach where teachers consider the diverse needs of all students, including those with autism. This approach involves creating a supportive learning environment, using various teaching strategies, and differentiating instruction to meet individual learning needs. Teachers must receive support in developing materials, resources, and professional development opportunities to implement effective inclusion practices. This support should come from the Government, through mandatory awareness raising and formal teaching courses at the recognized teacher training institutes, through engaging with other more experienced teachers and specialists, through the school administrations and principals themselves, and through self-study and experience.

However, it is not just the teachers who need greater support - students in the inclusive classrooms and all parents, whether mother and father of autistic children or not, require much greater information on autism and inclusion, and special targeted

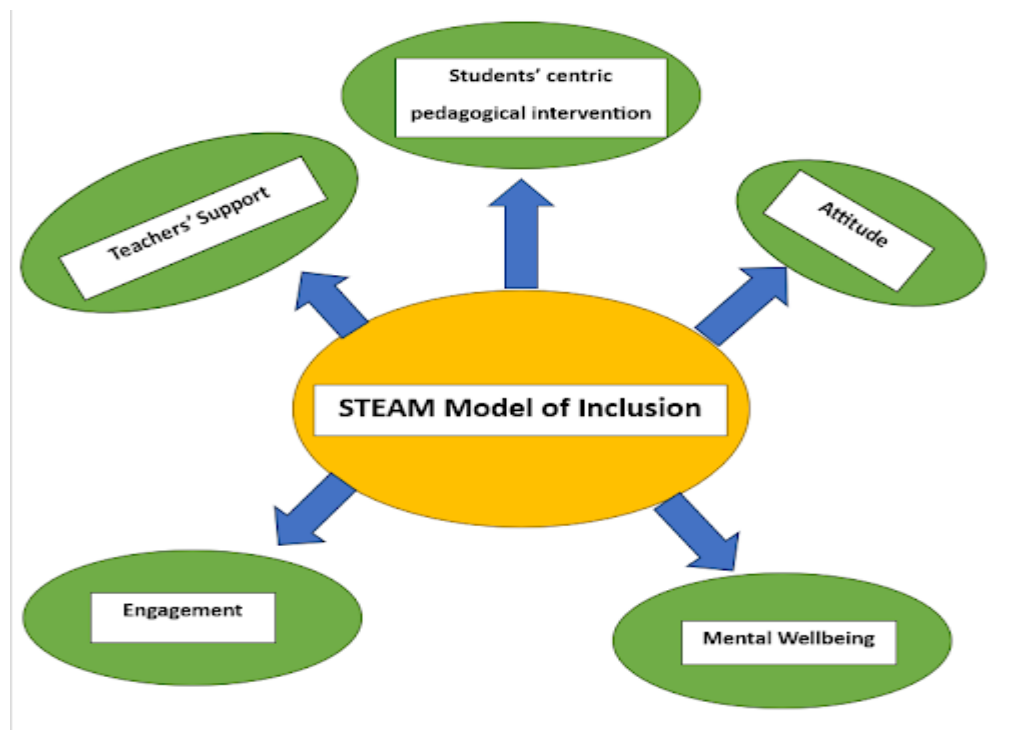
and tailored awareness raising and information sessions, and training for the affected parents, are crucial for promoting inclusion and addressing any concerns or challenges that arise. Positive attitudes and open-mindedness towards special needs children and inclusion are essential to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment.

Moreover, mental well-being is an integral aspect of an inclusive classroom. Teachers, students, and parents need to be mindful of their mental health and engage in self-care practices to manage the stress associated with teaching and learning in an inclusive environment, and managing an autistic child, who need special love and care. It is crucial to provide resources and support systems to help manage the emotional demands of the inclusive classroom.

that fosters academic and personal growth for all students, including those with autism.

Figure 6

Model of Inclusion Flower



In summary, creating an inclusive classroom requires a student-centric approach, teacher support, strong engagement with all stakeholders, positive attitudes, and focused consideration on stress and mental well-being. By addressing these factors, we can create a more inclusive learning environment

Implications of the Study

My study on the experiences of teachers into their current experiences and practices of inclusive education is not the first research into this topic in the academic forum. However, the research gap which I found from the literature review shows that very few qualitative studies have been conducted to explore early childhood development educators' perception of inclusion and their experience of including child with and without autism in kindergarten classrooms. Thus, this study has focused on the teaching experiences and challenges that were faced by early childhood educators inside the classroom and their coping strategies.

I believe this research will contribute to the area of inclusive education. The way in which my research participants view inclusion has a significant impact on their teaching practices and their happy experiences during their teaching journey. This research will be beneficial for both new and old teachers who are stepping into a situation where children with autism are included in a regular classroom, as well as for all parents and school authorities. I also hope that this research is beneficial for policy makers and educational practitioners, as much effort and resources, both human and financial, are required to help build a more positive perception on inclusion of the special needs child in regular classrooms at both national and community levels through awareness raising and targeted training.

This research will help the policy makers within the education sector at all levels in the federal system determine the loopholes in the drive for inclusive education. My participants reported that despite the equal participation approach expounded by the early childhood development centres, teachers experience many challenges which can be solved with appropriate professional development of teachers and improved collaboration between key stakeholders of the schools. The teachers' experiences are highly influenced by the inclusive education policy adopted by school authorities and the working environment at the schools, and significant efforts are required in Nepal to bring practice in line with policy and result in a situation where we practice what we preach.

My Final Thoughts

I am a researcher, and being an MPhil Scholar, I have investigated the teachers experience of inclusion responsibly. The concepts enshrined in STEAM Education, obtained from the classes at my University, promote a flourishing environment of justice and humanity. Why has this concept of transformative STEAM pedagogy been

introduced at the MPhil level? It appears to me that this was to make us aware and open our eyes to our surroundings and observe the prejudices that we, as teachers, are dealing with. Undertaking this research in such a topic was something which most of my colleague's thought was unsuitable; I am an MPhil scholar from the area of STEAM Education, and some believed that my research issue should be undertaken in the STEAM area or in innovative pedagogies. When you began any research, there should not be any compulsion to do research in a given area or even the subject in which you have enrolled; the research topic should not be narrowed on the basis of some specific area you studied in your journey toward the MPhil. Being a STEAM learner and scholar, the values I received from the study of STEAM was an asset to my research journey, and the course very effectively equipped me with the knowledge and skills which I needed to conduct research. It prepared me to be a potential researcher, and I gained insights, ideas and methodologies from the course.

The significance of any research is important or it has little reason – the significance of my research lies in illuminating societal discrimination, pain and injustice in the field of inclusive education where autistic children are involved. I chose to explore autism due to my past experience and values that I developed on my journey toward my MPhil – these have guided me to become a bias-free researcher, or as close to it as I can manage. From the very beginning, my priority was to complete the research rather than to obtain a further academic degree, as I wanted to open up the unheard and overlooked issues in the field of inclusive education. Discrimination, segregation, and societal dogmas regarding any form of disability is very prominent in our society and communities. Inclusion is matter of deep concern, no matter which educational stream you come from. Don't the people with a disability have the same rights to be included in the educational pathway as you and me? Nepal has progressive policies and laws concerning this matter – our legislature, laws and policies safeguard the right of the child with special needs. Increased participation of disabled children in the regular classroom is good and positive, as my participant teachers have perceived it – but what are their challenges?; how have they coped with it? My research and this dissertation have addressed these basic queries mentioned above. Research in this general field have been undertaken in many countries, in our Nepali context, I do not claim this is the first research to expose the pain, suffering and challenges facing teachers in the inclusive classroom – however, I would like to assure all readers of this dissertation that you will definitely feel the pain and

difficulties that my early childhood educators have experienced during the teaching of autistic children in the regular classroom, and how committed they are, and how they built the resilience to cope with all the challenges they faced during their recent teaching careers.

The research gap, which this thesis revealed in terms of lack of teacher's professional development, inspired me to conduct more research and run short courses, and to facilitate awareness programmes to help better prepare teachers for the challenges in the inclusive classroom. I hope my research will help all those dedicated teachers become more aware and better prepared for a successful learning classroom environment. When I was collecting data from my research participants, I focused on the challenges they faced in the classroom - with frustration, Ajita, Archana and Sabita responded that children with autism could have a better learning opportunity in a special school - all three of them are attempting their best to provide a quality learning environment to all their children in an inclusive classroom in a regular school . I personally sat inside the classrooms of these regular schools and observed the teaching practices of my participants. Later I was determined to work in the field of inclusive and special need education.

Research Limitations

I conducted my research on early childhood development centres in Kathmandu Valley. An early idea was to find gender parity in terms of the participants; however, I personally contacted more than 50 pre-schools, and did not find any male teachers educating autistic children at the early childhood level in inclusive classroom. The reason behind this provides scope for future research.

My major focus was on the schoolteachers who are following the early childhood level curriculum provided by the curriculum development centres – I therefore excluded school teachers who were following their own school curriculum. My personal vignette and my five participants' narrations might not be applicable across the board of teachers' experience, but the insight this study has provided will be very helpful for the teachers who wants to teach child with autism in their regular classroom.

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ANNEX
CONSENT LETTER

Title of the research: TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES ON
INCLUDING YOUNG CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN
REGULAR CLASSROOM: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for showing concern to participate in my research. The purpose of my inquiry is to explore the teachers' experiences in educating children with autism spectrum disorder in regular classrooms. The educational experiences included academic and Autistic children's behaviour in mainstream classrooms. My study is focused on kindergarten teachers of regular school education who are currently practicing inclusive education that incorporates children with ASD. Your contribution as a participant will help me in finding the result of my research.

Procedures

After you agree to work with me, there will be certain things you need to do like answering the questions related to the research, having formal or informal conversation, or taking an interview with you.

Time allotted for interview: 1 hour in maximum

Risk and Discomforts

I assure you that there won't be any risks and discomforts during the interview and discussion.

Confidentiality

All data from this study will be kept private as far as possible. Every participant including identity will not be revealed.

Voluntary Participation

You are not forced to participate in this research. Therefore, participation in this research study is voluntary. Though you start with me, you can also quit any time you want. You can also refuse to answer any question at any time.

Contacts

If you have any question regarding this research or you have problem continuing this research, either now or at any time in the future, please feel free to contact at 9808936939 or mail at sarita_mpsteam21@kusoed.edu.np.

Teachers' Lived Experiences on Including Young Children with Autism in
Classroom:

Interview Guidelines

SN	Research Questions	Interview Guidelines
1	<p>What are the experiences of ECD educators in educating children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in regular classrooms?</p>	<p>Part 1: Teaching Journey</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brief discuss on the participant's, family background, educational qualification, training and how the participant started teaching. 2. Sharing on encountering with autism and how initial experiences were. 3. Sharing recent teaching practices, classroom environment, nature of a child, school environment 4. Experiences of dealing children with autism in their classroom? <p>EG: १. यहाले कहिले देखि पढाउन सुरु गर्नु भयो ? (When did you start teaching career?)</p> <p>२. तपाईंलाई शिक्षक बन्न के कुराले उत्प्रेरित गर्यो ? (What motivated you to become a teacher?)</p> <p>३. तपाइले अटिजम भएका बालबालिकालाई कहिलेदेखि पढाउँदै आउनुभएको हो ? (Since when have you been teaching children with autism?)</p> <p>४. यहाले कुनै बिद्यार्थीमा autism भएको वा नभएको कुरा कसरि थाहा पाउनु हुन्छ ? (How do you know if a student has autism?)</p> <p>५. यहाले बिद्यार्थीहरुको सिकाई सम्बन्धि कुनै तालिम लिनु भएको छ कि छैन ? छ भने कस्तो किसिमको तालिम</p>

		<p>लिनु भएको छ ?/ छैन भने किन नलिनु भएको ? (Have you taken any training on student learning or teaching? If yes, what kind of training have you taken? / If not, why not?)</p> <p>६. यहाले autism भएका बिद्यार्थीहरुको सिकाई सम्बन्धि कुनै तालिम लिनु भएको छ कि छैन ? छ भने कस्तो किसिमको तालिम लिनु भएको छ ?/ छैन भने किन नलिनु भएको ? (Have you received any training to deal students with autism? If yes, what kind of training have you taken? / If not, why not?)</p> <p>७ तपाईंलाई autism भएका बिद्यार्थीहरु पढाउनका लागि के कुराले प्रोत्साहन गर्यो ? (What motivated you to teach students with autism?)</p>
2	How do ECD educators perceive and practice inclusion in the regular classroom?	<p>Part 2:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you define Inclusion? 2. How do you perceive including children with autism in your classroom? 3. What do you think of inclusion of children with autism in their classroom? <p>EG: तपाइले अटिजम भएका नानीहरुलाई regular classroom मा पढाउदा उनीहरु अरु autism नभएका नानीहरु भन्दा केहि भिन्नता पाउनु भएको छ वा छैन ? छ भने कस्तो ? (When you teach children with autism spectrum disorder in a regular classroom, do they</p>
3	How do ECD educators cope	

	<p>with the challenges they faced in the regular Classroom?</p>	<p>differ from other children in classroom? If so what differences have you observed?)</p> <p>९. Autism भएका नानीहरुलाई पढाउदा कस्तो महसुस गर्नुभएको छ (सहस ? असहज) ? किन ? कसरि ? (How do you feel when you teach children with autism (Easy? Difficult)? Why ? and How?</p> <p>Part 3</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Sharing on challenges teachers have faced, including young children with autism. 5. Sharing on coping strategies 6. How you handle children with autism in classroom 7. What techniques use to involve children with autism in classroom 8. What are the difficulties faced by the teachers while integrating children with autism <p>EG: १०.यहाले autism भएका नानीहरुलाई पढाउने क्रम मा अनुभव गर्नु भएको केहि बिशेस क्षणहरु वा सम्झन लायक केहि क्षणहरु छन् ?छन् भने बताइदिनुस न .</p> <p>(Do you have any special moments or memorable moments while teaching children with autism? Please share if you have any.</p> <p>११. यहाहरुले autism भएका नानीहरुलाई regular class मा राखेर पढाउदा कस्तो चुनौती ,अपठ्यारो हरु भोग्नु भएको छ ? केहि उदाहरण सहित भनिदिनुस न ,(What are the challenges and difficulties you have faced while teaching children with autism in regular classes? Please give some examples)</p>
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		<p>१२. Autism भएका नानीहरुलाई mainstream classroom मा राखेर पढाउदा autism भएका नानीहरु ले कक्षाकोठामा कस्तो प्रकारको व्यवहारहरु प्रस्तुत गर्ने गर्दछन् ? (What kind of behaviors do autistic children show when teaching in the mainstream classroom?)</p> <p>१३. Autism भएका नानीहरुलाई mainstream classroom मा राखेर पढाउदा autism भएका नानीहरु को व्यवहारहरुमा कस्तो परिवर्तन पाउनु भएको छ ? (What sort of changes (academic/behavior) have you observed in children with autism when they are taught in a mainstream classroom?)</p> <p>१४. Autism भएका नानीहरुको सिकाइमा यहाले पढाउने क्रम मा उनीहरुको अभिभावकको भूमिका कस्तो पाउनु भएको छ ? यहाको साथीको / विद्यालयको / र अन्य कर्मचारीहरुको भूमिका कस्तो पाउनु भएको छ? (During your teaching what do you think of the role of parents/ co-workers/ School authorities in teaching children with autism</p> <p>१५. तपाइले autism भएका नानीहरुलाई कसरि पढाउने / वा कस्तो किसिमको व्यवहार गर्ने गर्नु भएको छ ? (How do you teach and / or treat children with autism?)</p> <p>१६. Autism भएका नानीहरुले तपाइलाई /साथीहरुलाई कस्तो किसिमको व्यवहार देखाउने गर्दछन् ? (How do children with autism treat you / and their friends?)</p> <p>१७. तपाईंका बिचारमा autism भएका नानीहरुलाई</p>
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		<p>अझै प्रभावकारी ढंगबाट शिक्षण गर्न के गर्नु पर्छ होला ? (What do you think what should be done to teach children with autism more effectively?)</p>
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SAMPLE OF PARTICIPANT'S TRANSCRIBED NARRATIVES

Teacher's Narratives (1st Sept, 2022)

Transcribed text

Pseudonym: Ajita

Researcher: Sarita Khadka

Location of the interview: Lalitpur

List of Acronyms: AS= Ajita Subedi, IN=Interviewer

Table: Interview Transcripts (1st round of Interview)

IN: Hello Maam, Namakar!

Hope you are doing well,

AS: Namaste maam, I am fine maam, How are you?

IN: Ahh, I am also fine, good to see you after our phone conversation.

AS: Same here maam, so sorry maam, I let you waited here, I just finished my lesson plan. (Looked bit reluctant)

IN: No worries.

IN: So, Shall we start our conversation? As we had already discussed about the purpose of our meeting, so shall we move forward?

AS: Sure maam,

IN: I am doing my MPhil thesis on the topic of teachers experiences teaching in an inclusive setting, just a quick reminder, So maam, Can you share little bit about yourself and your teaching journey?

AS: Sure ma'am, I am Ajita, and now 30 years old, I have 2 children. And I am a grade teacher at UKG now, I really wanted to become a teacher since my childhood (she had a smile on her face). I love to work with small children. I was a weak student in my initial days, but there was one teacher. He passed away 5 years back, and he always encouraged me to study and supported me to be a teacher. His nature and devotion towards his teaching profession inspired me to become a teacher. I started teaching from 2015, and discontinued during covid pandemic 2019, and re-joined on 2021 so I have been almost 4 -5 years of experience in teaching profession. I did not score good marks in examinations, but I discovered my potential and become a happy student. I lost my fear of going to school and my attitude towards other teachers suddenly changed, I became more attentive inside the classroom which helped me to become an average student in the class.

IN: Wow, So with your teachers inspiration you became a teacher?

AS: Yes maam, I started teaching being a private tutor.

IN: Private tutor? Can you share the story of your home tutoring?

AS: Yes maam, I was involved in the home-to-home teaching service at that time. I am very caring and showed a lot of love and affection to the small children, no matter if I knew them or did not. One day I was helping 2 of my students with their homework, their parents were out of country, and they were left home with their caregiver. We played a game after completing all their tasks. We played blind fold; one person was blind folded and one of the other two had to pinch the blind folded person. And the blind folded person had to guess who pinched him. We played that game for half an hour. It was already 5:30 PM by the time we finished, and I had to go to another house as well to teach another group. Both refused to allow me to go. They were enjoying the game so much.

IN: And how was your experience in kindergarten teaching?

AS: It all started with my frustration actually, I was not doing anything after marriage. All the house chores and family responsibilities made me dull, so I decided to teach in Montessori school, and I took 3-month training from Early Childhood Development Centre and joined the Montessori school near my house. The training helped me to understand what we need to expect from young learners, their different capacities at different ages, and how teachers are expected to behave with children. I attended International Child Development (ICDP) training as well, where I learnt how to teach young minds, how to treat them, and techniques to support them emotionally.

IN: Please share your story of encountering autism.

AS: I heard the word autism before I began teaching. The employer of one of my relative had a son with autism; however, I did not have any idea of how they were taught inside the classroom. I heard from the relative that his boss's child was psycho and a danger to people around him. So I had very negative perception towards autism in the beginning.

IN: Hm.....

AS: I was so scared about that child in the beginning I took one week's leave, and the Principal had convinced that child's parent to wait for a week, I was consider as one of the most loving and caring teachers and recommended to be the one who took this autistic child, so the boy's parents waited until I returned from my leave.

IN: So, how it went....

AS: Maam, I had 20 students at that time, one sister was provided for the entire block, so she did not manage to stay inside the class for whole day. I was told by the parents that boy's cognitive, social and emotional skills hadn't developed properly. That's why, even though he was 9 years old, he was placed in my class. I was doing all my usual tasks in a regular way on that first day. I had a negative view of the autistic child, and he cried the whole day and I had to send him out. I felt upset and agitated and didn't like my class being disturbed. On the first day the autistic student hit one of the other students, who was a son of a school co-ordinator. That made me more furious, and I rushed to the co-ordinator's room and started making a plea that the autistic child be removed from our school.

IN: What sort of feeling you had at that time?

AS: I was so frustrated at one point of time; I had decided to quit my job. I am a jolly person and when I work, I work whole heartedly. But that child's behavioural issues, pushed me to my limit. I still remember one event. It was a birthday celebration of one of the students in our class. The parents of the birthday boy were there in the class and Ryan (the child with autism) was sniffing his hands. He was putting his finger under his pants and smelling his private parts. He was continuously rubbing his private parts and sniffing his hands and most embarrassing thing was he wanted me to smell his hand too. That was so disgusting. He had sniffed my body and my hair previously but on that day, it was so disgusted, I almost vomited. The birthday boy's parents were there, and I was embarrassed and told the sister to take him to another room immediately. After he left for the other room, we had a smooth birthday party. Maam, Can we sit somewhere out for the sharing?

IN: Sure maam, I stayed in hattiban just nearby this place, may be we can meet up in my university, what do you thing?

AS: That is nice idea maam, I have to leave now.

IN: Sure maam, will meet on Friday then.

AS: Not on Friday maam, tomorrow.

IN: Sure maam.

Table: Interview Transcripts (2nd round of Interview) 4th Sept, 2022

IN: Hello maam,

AS: Namaste maam, now this place is fine. I do not feel comfortable in principal office.

IN: Great, How was your day maam?

AS: It was good, feeling tired.

IN: Oh, so sorry for that, so shall we start?

AS: Yes maam,

IN: Last time you shared your story on encountering autism. So how is your current teaching practices?

AS: When I joined xxxxx school, I was happy because the paying scale in this school is comparatively higher and every Friday, we receive teacher training. I got new ideas and learned about emerging teaching approaches. The principal is also very supportive, and she has a solution for every problem. At first, I quit my last job, trying to avoid autism but sometimes the universe conspires to make you face things, and to help remove negative perception. We had a session within our regular teacher professional development sessions about differentiated instruction and it helped me realise it is possible to keep special need children in a regular classroom set up with the help of a differentiated instruction approach. I recalled my past behaviour and felt guilty.

IN: How many children are there in your class maam with Autism? And how are they?

AS: I have two autistic children in my class now, Ryan and Avantika (Pseudo names). Ryan is very hyperactive, and he keeps on running here and there. My assistant helps me to keep him calm. We let him do table-based activity such as beading and finger painting. Avantika is also mildly autistic; however, she can do simple worksheets, colouring. She can also repeat back to me what I say and participate in other group works. She is 7 years old and transferred from another preschool. With a team approach and good effort, she and Ryan are improving. Ryan, for example, is much better at sitting still now. Both children show some ability when given time to do the task. In group work, they struggle, but when they are given time to do individual tasks, they have shown improvement, especially with their communication skills. They can now communicate hello, hi, bye, come here, sit down, as well as being able to use expressions, such as showing hungry or sad expressions to their parents. And I am happy that both of these children have adapted the school schedule and have an idea of what we are going to do next. They call their friends by name and can stay in the dining hall, dance room and in playground for a few minutes. Before, this progress was made, it was unimaginable to even think them capable of playing with their friends.

IN: So, how is your feeling now?

AS: I started loving all the children, those with and without autism. I remember how my favourite teacher supported me during my poor performance in my earlier career and this inspired me to support these Autistic children more. The support I am getting from the school principal, parents and colleagues is praiseworthy. I am having my best time now. I am now very open and ready to teach children with ASD in my regular class. I feel bad I avoided these children in the beginning. I would say I am educating them but the meaning of Education for children with autism and children without autism is different. The goals and objectives are different. For autistic children I consider educating as being mainly about teaching them social values, life skills and self-help habits, which they have not being taught due to their condition. For them to learn basic life skills such as cleaning their nose, wearing underwear's, eating on their own, and toileting is must and, someone has to be prepared to teach them.

IN: Could you please further share the story on how is it going?

AS: In UKG, they (Children with ASD) are learning basic academic skills, number counting, recognizing alphabet, making words and so forth. Their brain does not function properly in terms of acquiring knowledge in comparison to other child without autism. We are giving them extra time and they have improved a lot in social skills, but they are still not up to the standard of the average UKG. These children can't write or read; however, both of my children have their own strengths, one is good at drawing, and another is good at recalling and memorization.

IN: So, how have you been coping with this?

AS: Maam, If parents support and nurture their child properly at home, I think the teacher's work and tension will be halved. To increase the effectiveness and fun involved in teaching it is important to understand the child and know the child's surrounding, their parents, friends, and favourite people or things. We should know everything which is related to our child, and parents' engagement plays a pivotal role here. Normally we introduced one concept for a week, those children who can easily grab the concept it is easy for them, and they learn the idea of a concept in no time. But children with autism and other students who are academically poorer need time to understand the particular concept on their own, and if parents are not supportive enough, and don't continue our work at home, all our hard works goes in vain. The effective learning of a child, especially one with autism, depends on a team approach

between the teacher and parent. If they support and collaborate with us and communicate with us, the teaching experiences will be better. And both of my parents are very supportive. Still, I feel bad when parents expect too much from their autistic child. They know their children are incapable of doing some things, and sometimes when their expectations are unrealistic it is disheartening.

In: Alright, So maam, How many students are there in your class now?

As: Maam, right now I am teaching 16 students and among them 2 children has been diagnosed with mild autism. One is 8 years old and another is 7.

In: Is there any reason behind them to be in kindergarten, Normally that age group children are enrolled in elementary grades?

As: Maam, though they are 8 and 7, their cognitive, social and emotional skills hasn't developed properly till now. That's why they are in kindergarten.

In: hmmmmm

AS: Maam, Normally parents themselves inform us regarding the status of child, two of the children of my classroom has been involved in speech therapy as they are having difficulty in speaking. Beside that I have explored myself in internet and saw my relatives child who is suffering from autism, Normally, If we look at the child carefully in the classroom and observed their social skills, we can easily figure out if the child has autism or not.

In: hmmmm....

As: And sometimes school take help of psychologist as well, the psychologist rarely visits the school.

In: Alright maam, so what sort of concerns and feedbacks do you get from a psychologist?

As: Maam, they suggest parents to engage their children in therapies, one of the child was so stubborn, he used to give lots of trouble while I was delivering a lesson. After attending few sessions of therapy, that child is clam now. Maam, I should leave now. Will meet you next week.

In: Sure maam, See you.