

Situational Analysis of Out of School Children and Youth with Disabilities and at Risk of Dropping Out of Two Public Schools in Capital City of Bhutan

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Executive Summary

The joint action-oriented research project titled ‘A Multi-Country Study on Educational Innovations for Out of School Children (OOSC) and Children at Risk of Dropping Out (covering Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal)’ is supported by International Development Research Corporation (IDRC) and Knowledge Innovation Exchange (KIX). The 3-member consortium involved in this joint project are School of Arts, Kathmandu University (Lead) in Nepal, South Asian Institute of Social Transformation, Bangladesh (Partner), and Paro College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan (Partner). However, each of the partner countries involved addressed their own respective themes that involved a particular group of out of school children and children at risk of dropping out. Paro College of Education agreed to include out of school children with disabilities (OOSCD) and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out in a capital district of Bhutan.

Aim and Objectives:

The overarching aim of this joint action-oriented research project is to innovate and evaluate education approaches and practices that would address in increasing inclusion of OOSC in public schools and institutions alike and prevent children at risk of dropping out in public schools. In addressing the objectives, it was ensured that these objectives were aligned with the primary objectives of KIX, namely knowledge generation, knowledge mobilization, and capacity building. However, this situational analysis that consisted of understanding the situation, gathering baseline data and identifying possible intervention strategies and programs addresses particularly the primary objective of knowledge generation as follows:

- To identify OOSCD and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out in capital district of Bhutan (Thimphu);
- To segregate type of disabilities and severity in OOSCD;
- To identify children with disabilities at risk of dropping out in the two public schools;
- To identify appropriate intervention strategies and programs according to the need of OOSCD that may be offered by respective schools and CSOs that support persons living with disabilities;
- To implement possible intervention strategies and programs to reduce children with disabilities of dropping out currently enrolled in the two public schools;
- To ensure effective collaboration amongst the schools and CSOs that support persons living with disabilities; and

- To ensure effective coordination amongst the schools and CSOs that support persons living with disabilities.

Context of the study:

The current formal Bhutanese education system has undergone an extensive transformation since the inception of modern educational system in Bhutan in 1914 with the establishment of first secular school. It was in the late 1950s and early 1960s that 59 formal schools were established across the country with curriculum that was borrowed from neighboring India. Hindi, the official language of India, was extensively used as a medium of instruction in these schools and it was in 1962 that the government decided to adopt a Western-style education system and the English language as the medium of instruction in all schools. Within a period of six decades, the educational sector has grown from 59 schools in 1960s to 767 schools in 2021 (NSB, 2021). Similarly, the enrolment figures have increased from 400 in the 1960s to 208,993 students in 2021 (NSB, 2021).

Bhutan embraced its first special education system in 1973 by opening a School for the Blind, currently known as the Muenselling Institute, which catered for twenty-six students with visual impairment. In 1979, the institute initiated the integration of their students into a local mainstream school. Since then, students from this institute have had the opportunities to participate equally with other peers in daily school activities in mainstream schools. Today many of the alumni from this institute contribute equally to the socioeconomic development of the country, taking up posts such as physiotherapists, teachers, musicians, entrepreneurs, curriculum officers, etc., to name just a few (Chhogyel, 2006; Dorji, 2015).

Realizing the need for such enabling services for children with other forms of disability, the government initiated special education programmes by establishing a self-contained classroom/special educational needs (SEN) unit in Changangkha Middle Secondary School as a pilot project in 2001. This unit provided opportunities for integration of children with SEN into the mainstream classroom. In 2003 another special school, currently known as Wangsel Institute, was established for children with hearing impairments as a SEN unit within the Drugyel Lower Secondary School.

However, the concept of Inclusive Education (IE) in Bhutan was introduced in 2011, although it had existed in the West since the 1980s and 1990s. Dukpa (2014) and Schuelka (2014) assert that IE in Bhutan is still in its initial stage with many challenges that impede the implementation of successful inclusive practices. The challenges include untrained teachers

handling heterogeneous classrooms, a curriculum that is rigid, a pedagogy implemented as teacher-centric, inappropriate assessment practices, minimal parent–teacher collaboration, and financial constraints (Dukpa, 2014; Schuelka, 2014, 2018). Despite these challenges, and due to the increasing number of children with SEN in Bhutan, the Ministry of Education have currently identified 24 public schools as schools that support IE and SEN programmes across the country. These schools that support IE and SEN programmes cater for approximately 748 students with SEN.

Bhutan, in its move to provide education for every child including children with disabilities has ratified or is a signatory to several international declarations, conventions, instruments, policies, legislation and commitments that address inclusion in education. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the Education for All Act (1990), The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), the Darkar Framework for Action (2000), the Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (2010), the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2008), and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities (2008). Similarly, Bhutan’s commitment to supporting every child and children with disabilities has also been strongly addressed in the Constitution of Bhutan (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2007) and other policies and legislation (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2019; MoE, 2014, 2017b, 2017c). For instance, the Constitution of Bhutan highlights equal access to free basic education from pre-primary grade to tenth grade for all Bhutanese children as indicated:

The state shall provide free education to all children of school going age up to tenth standard and ensure that technical and professional education shall be made generally available and that higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (Article 9.16).

Qualitative analysis of dropouts and children who have never attended school based on 2017 population and housing census of Bhutan indicated “out of the total population of 6 to 24-year old, 7 percent have never attended school, while 9.7 percent have dropped out of school prior to completing Class X (MOE, 2020). It is asserted that these children who are out of school or never attended schools are often those from the most socially marginalized communities, including children with disabilities, children from ethnic-minorities, children excluded due to gender barriers and children living from extreme poverty (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2016).

Conversely, many countries have challenges in responding to the needs of out-of-school children (OOSC) due to lack of key data, analysis and policy gaps that address OOSC. Similarly, these countries generally lack adequate tools and methodologies to identify OOSC that measures the scope and inform the complexity of exclusion and disparities, that assess the reasons of exclusion, and to inform policy and planning. In addition to lack of information on known OOSC, there are also unknown OOSC who are not in the radar of the government and not monitored. They are children who have never been enrolled in the school and may have not been part of formal schooling system – for example children with disabilities attending special institutions. Similarly, Bhutan is no exception that has challenges and issues involving OOSC and in particular out-of-school children with disabilities (OOSCD) due to lack of reliable information and effective policies.

Children with disabilities are often recognized as being vulnerable and at higher risk of dropping out of school before attaining basic education (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Stark & Noel, 2015; Smink and Reimer, 2009). It is also emphasized that children and adolescents with disabilities are more likely to be out of school or at risk of leaving school before completing primary education (UNESCO, 2017). Notwithstanding, disability as a common risk factor there is minimal literature that address research on out-of-school children with disabilities (Sharma, 2014). Further, it is emphasized that in developing countries, children with disabilities encounter significant barriers to attend and complete basic schooling (Filmer, 2008). According to United Nations, there are 240 million children living with one or more form of disabilities in the world out of which 50% of them are out of school (UNICEF USA, n.d.).

It is estimated that the prevalence rate of persons with disabilities stands at 2.1% in 2017 with 15567 persons with disabilities (PHCB, 2017) in Bhutan. Worryingly, it is also estimated that there are 21% of children aged between 2 and 9 years who have one or more disabilities as per the comprehensive Two Stage Child Disability Study Report, 2012 (NSB, 2012). There are currently 748 children with disabilities out of 1600 aged 3 to 24 years enrolled in mainstream schools that support special education programmes (Tshering, P.S., 2021). The remaining children with disabilities have either attended schools in the past or never attended. However, there are no studies that address OOSCD and children with

disabilities at risk of dropping out in Bhutan and what is being done for these children with disabilities.

Methodology and Approaches:

In conducting the situational analysis for this action-oriented research project, a desk review of literatures and documents that concerned Bhutan's context was considered in understanding the situation of OOSCD and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out in capital district of Bhutan. Interestingly, there are no single literature and document that particularly addressed OOSCD and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out in Bhutan. This study is first of its kind in considering OOSCD and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out in Bhutanese schools.

An exploratory sequential mixed methods design was used which involved the baseline data collection using qualitative approach (Semi-structured interview) in understanding the situation of OOSCD and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out in the first phase. In the second phase, a quantitative approach (Survey) was used in identifying and locating OOSCD in the district. To identify and locate these group of children, support was sought from schools, CSOs and the Ministry of Education for data of OOSCD and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out. In addition, this survey also addressed type of disabilities and the severity.

Research Sites:

Initially the proposed site for conduct of study were two public schools that support Special Educational Needs (SEN) programs in capital district of Bhutan (Thimphu), one located in the urban center and the other in the rural part. However, as the study progressed it was felt necessary to include a CSO and an institute that supported persons with disabilities particularly children and youth with disabilities. Therefore, a CSO and an institute have been included in addition to two public schools as implementing partners. Based on the strengths of these implementing partners in offering intervention strategies and programs, the OOSCD and children and with disabilities at risk of dropping out were enrolled as per the support and intervention required.

A brief background of the implementing partners is discussed as follows:

Changangkha Middle Secondary School

The public school is located in the core of the city and was first established in 1961 as a primary school till Class 5. Currently the school is a Middle Secondary School with students enrolled in Class 10. It was in 2001 that the government initiated special education programmes by establishing a self-contained classroom/special educational needs (SEN) unit in Changangkha Middle Secondary School as a pilot project. This unit provided opportunities for integration of children with SEN into the mainstream classrooms. With the adoption of Inclusive Education in 2011 the school witnessed large number of children with SEN being enrolled in the school.

Currently, there are 101 children (61 male and 40 female) with SEN enrolled in different classes supported by 14 SEN teachers (1 male and 13 female). These children are supported with a continuum of education provisions – full inclusion and partial inclusion, depending on the severity of their disability. These children have disabilities such as, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Learning Difficulties, physical disabilities, speech disorders and gross motor problems. Though children with mild disabilities are fully included in mainstream classrooms, there are some children with moderate disabilities partially included with provisions of pull-out services. Few children with severe disabilities are provided support in SEN unit/self-contained classroom.

In supporting these children with SEN, the school provides varying intervention strategies and programs that are required as per the need of the child. Intervention strategies and programs such as Activity for Daily Living, Behavioral Interventions, Pre-Vocational Skills Education, and other Functional Curriculum are provided as per the needs to children with SEN. However, for this study the school will implement Activity for Daily Living and other Functional Curriculum as intervention strategies for those OOSCD and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out where appropriate.

Yangchen Gatshel Higher Secondary School

The school is located in a highland rural village at the base of Dagala Mountain range in Thimphu district about 15 KM from the city. The school was established in 1992 as a community school and has since progressed as primary school, middle secondary school and to a higher secondary school in beginning 2022. This school caters to children of nomadic community and police personnel working for Chamgang Central Prison, the biggest prison in Bhutan. The school was identified as inclusive school in 2019 and currently the school has 40 children (26 male and 14 female) with SEN in different classes supported by 7 SEN teachers

(4 male and 3 female). These children with SEN come from nomadic community and the police community. However, almost all children enrolled have mild to moderate form of disabilities most with Learning Disabilities and few with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Down Syndrome.

Similar to Changangkha Middle Secondary School, this school also support partial inclusion with provisions of pull-out services with intervention strategies and programs such as Activity for Daily Living, Behavioral Interventions, Pre-Vocational Skills Education, and other Functional Curriculum for children with moderate disabilities. Children with mild disabilities are fully included in mainstream classrooms along with their peers without disabilities. However, for this study the school will implement Activity for Daily Living and other Functional Curriculum as intervention strategies for those OOSCD and children with disabilities at risk of dropping out where appropriate.

Ability Bhutan Society

The Ability Bhutan Society (ABS) was established in 2007 as a public benefit organization offering services and support to children with moderate to severe disabilities and their families. It was in 2011 ABS was registered with Civil Society Organization Authority of Bhutan as a CSO. Currently there are 30 children (22 males and 18 females) enrolled for Centre based intervention programs as supported by 16 personnel (5 males and 11 females) that consists of special educators, occupational therapist, speech therapist, medical professional and social workers. The children enrolled have disabilities such as, Autism Spectrum Disorder, deaf, Cerebral Palsy, Down syndrome, developmental delay, Dandy Walker Syndrome, physical disabilities, speech disorders and Meningoencephalitis.

The ABS provide direct one to one early intervention in the Centre for children with diverse disabilities, home-based intervention for children with profound disabilities, Activity for Daily Living, family support programs and outreach programs.

Due to lack of experts and professionals in the Centre, the ABS sought support from experts and professionals outside Bhutan for capacity building of social workers and facilitators and have numerous collaborations with organizations outside Bhutan. These experts and professional such as special educators, speech therapist, physical therapist, ABA therapist, occupational therapist, pediatric neuropsychologist, touch therapist and developmental pediatrician have worked in the center for short term providing support and training for social workers and facilitators in dealing children with diverse disabilities. Such training and capacity building programs have immensely benefited the Centre for social

workers and facilitators to work effectively with children affected by moderate to severe form of disabilities. For this research project ABS will provide therapies and strategies of early intervention as per the needs of the child.

VTOB Educational Solutions and Services

The VTOB Educational Solutions and Services (VTOB) was established in 2020 initially as teacher's voluntary group and a social enterprise in the wake of COVID 19 pandemic to support the community by complementing, supporting and offering a host of educational opportunities through creative, innovative and voluntary programs. Currently there are 100 children (50 males and 50 females) including 3 children with disabilities (2 males and 1 female) availing different services such as digital literacy, academic coaching, STEM and functional learning and music. There are 55 (10 males and 45 females) personnel supporting these aforementioned services that consists of teachers, special educators, IT professionals and researchers. The VTOB cater its services and support mainly for teachers and children both enrolled in schools and out of schools. Similarly, the VTOB also offers children with any need-based intervention programs and initiatives.

Working modality of these schools and institutions:

Upon identifying the children and youth with different disabilities and their severity, each of the schools and institutions enrolled these children and youth based on the needs and their interests as identified in the second phase of the data collected. It was agreed that for schools the intervention programmes will be offered after school hours and for the other two institutions as per the convenience of the children and their parents. The implementation of the intervention programmes commenced from October 2022 and will conclude in October 2023. A detailed quarterly report will be submitted to the Project Coordinator about the progress of the individual child and the overall management of the intervention programme by each of the implementing partners.

The baseline data collection during the initial implementation of the intervention programme was conducted for the first quarter that included observation of the intervention programmes and interviews with children, parents and SENCOs. Further, the researchers will visit these schools and institutions every three months for monitoring and evaluation of the progress of the intervention programme as implemented.

Research Participants:

A convenience sampling approach was used in reaching out for the participants for both the phases of baseline data collection. The first phase of baseline data collection involved participants from Ministry of Education, CSOs that support persons living with disabilities, schools that support SEN programmes, and parent representatives as shown:

| Sl. No | Representation of participants | Quantity/Gender |
|---------------|---|------------------------|
| 1 | Program Officers from Ministry of Education | 2M |
| 2 | District Education Officers | 3M |
| 3 | School Principals/Vice Principals | 4M/1F |
| 4 | School SENCOS | 2M/2F |
| 5 | CSO Program Officer | 1F |
| 6 | Parents | 3M/10F |

Similarly, for the second phase of the baseline data collection it involved exclusively parents of OOSCD and youths with disabilities. In identifying these OOSCD and youths, data of OOSCD and the contact of parents were sought from respective schools, Ministry of Education and CSOs that support persons living with disabilities.

Initially there were 37 eligible parent participants (33 from urban and 4 from rural) though only 17 participants (16 from urban and 1 from rural) agreed to be interviewed. The participants were contacted by phone to confirm their participation and seek consent. Some did not respond to the call, few left for other districts, and others did not want to participate. Most of the participants were mothers.

Another effective strategy employed in identifying OOSCD and youths with disabilities was conducted by advocacy and awareness campaign that was aired on media platforms such as national television channel - Bhutan Broadcasting Service, Facebook pages of participating schools and centers that support disability and individual Facebook pages. Similarly, flyers and posters were also used for the advocacy and awareness campaign.

It was observed that due to this advocacy and awareness campaign, many parents and guardians of OOSCD and youth with disabilities who did not participate in the survey made inquiries with respective schools and centers for enrolling their children in availing the opportunity. Therefore, the schools and the centers were able to enroll several OOSCD and youths with disabilities upon verification.

Qualitative analysis of dropouts and children who have never attended school based on 2017 population and housing census of Bhutan indicated “that some groups of 6 to 24-year old are more at risk of never attending school and of dropping out prior to completing Class 10 than others. In particular those with a disability, those in rural places, and those affected by poverty are at a higher risk than others (UNICEF, 2020). But for now, no proper records have been maintained both at Ministry of Education and schools.

Major findings:

This section focuses on analysis of the qualitative data collected from parents, SEN coordinators, educationists and school leaders through Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions. The presentation is divided into two sections- parents and principals, SEN coordinators, SEN teachers and administrators. The following are prominent factors for CWD for not attending school or dropping out of school as per the parent’s response.

Findings that emerged from interviews with parents:

1. Economically disadvantaged:

The study revealed that those families who were economically disadvantaged were unable to either send their children to school or continue their education. Economic disadvantage coupled with children’s severe health condition was a big problem for retention in school, as one of the parents reported “We just depend on the husband's salary only. It would be nice if we could afford to have someone to take care of her and she could study too”. Further, it was reported that either one of the parents, particularly mothers stayed with their children either at home or school full time supporting with their basic daily living needs such as transporting to schools, assist toileting, providing food and assisting teachers in the classroom. For example, Mother A said, “I cannot keep her with others and I always have to stay at home with her. It is better if parents are well off but like us we have to do everything and we also have to carry her to the toilet”. Further, the Covid 19 pandemic and inflation aggravated the living conditions for these parents of children with disabilities. Thus, their resources were affected and couldn’t manage ways to send their children to school.

2. Single parent:

The study also revealed that single parents have more issues with sending their children to school or supporting them full time. Due to poor economic conditions it was reported that the children with disabilities were forced out of schools as the single parent could not conduct themselves as stay-in parents due to their engagement in economic activities and other family obligations. For instance, Mother B shared, "I have no choice but to take her with me. There was no one to look after her so had to drop out of the school". It is to be noted that as per the school's policy, if the child has mobility issues or has a severe disability, a fulltime caregiver will be required to assist with transporting the child from classroom to the toilet, provide meals during the lunch recess and assist with other daily living needs.

3. Feeling of insecurity

a) Sexual abuse/harassment

Parents particularly of girl child were concerned and reported feeling of insecurity for their girl child being sexually abused. Further, they reported that it was even more vulnerable for a girl child who had language and speech disorders. Therefore, most of the parents stopped sending their children to the school. As one parent remarked:

I was worried as she was a young girl. I sent her to school and picked her back on time before it was dark. I didn't send her anywhere and took care of her all the time by myself. I am more worried about my daughter as she is a female and can't speak so it is quite risky.

b) Bullying

Almost all the parents confirmed bullying as another concern mainly name calling and physical abuse. Name calling was more prominent in the schools that affected these children's mental wellbeing and deterring from coming to school. It was also reported that they felt insecure when their children were left unattended and feared that they would be manhandled and physically abused when a parent said "In my absence he might get bullied and beaten because he do not talk".

4. Severe behavioral disorders

Children with severe behavioral disorders posed risk of harming other children without disabilities due to their aggressive behaviors such as hitting, biting and scratching. Similarly, fidgeting nature in these children disrupted the teaching learning activities in the classroom. Due to these issues of behavioral disorders the parents reported apprehension of sending to school and feared that their children may harm other children and disrupt classroom teaching. For instance, a fulltime working parent who kept her mother as a caregiver for her daughter with severe disability did not have confidence in keeping her daughter in the school, as she reported:

She beats the other student in the school. My mother called me once saying my daughter beats younger students and snatches their books, tears their books and throws at them, it was ok to take her out of the school. My mother wasn't able to take care of her.

5. Children with mobility issues

Children with mobility issues was another reason that deterred them in going to school. These children required a fulltime attendant to move around in the school and the parents were not available most of the time owing to economic activities and other engagements. Similarly, some of these children were not able to sit properly and had to be laid in sleeping position. Further, the inaccessibility physical environment in these schools deterred children with mobility issues to attend. For example, another parent reported, “she has a physical disability in one arm and she can't even use the wheelchair properly. She cannot walk. I didn't enroll her in school as she cannot walk at all”.

6. Discouraging teachers

In some cases where the children had severe disabilities and the teachers could not handle and provide appropriate support discouraged the parents in sending these children to schools. Having to monitor 35 to 40 other students in the classroom, it was very difficult to provide individual support and attention to the children with severe disabilities.

7. Adult student with disabilities

It was reported that most adult student with disabilities gradually leave schools and stay home. This was due to issues with transition as these children did not have anywhere to go

after attaining adulthood, as one of the parents commented. “Unfortunately, the reality is these kids will land up in the house”.

8. Distance of school

Long distance of schools from home was another reason for children with disabilities not attending school. Though the parents wanted to enroll their children in the school of choice, it was far from their home that posed challenges in sending them to these schools. A parent from the highland community reported, “We live in the highlands and school for SEN is located in town only”. For some parents though initially, their children were enrolled in the schools, after sometime the children had to leave the school as the parents faced challenges in transporting their children from home to school and back after school when a parent said, “It was very difficult to send her to school as I pack her lunch and drop her to the bus station and coming home was also a hassle.”

9. Change of place for parents

For some of the parents, particularly public servants when they had to move to another district it became cumbersome in enrolling their children in a school that supports SEN programme. It was reported that since there was only one school that supports SEN programme in almost all the districts, the location of the school did not favor in their children’s placement and therefore could not enroll them.

10. Parents’ perception

The study indicated that children with disabilities also drop out of school because parents perceive that their children are academically very poor and that sending them to school is of no use and that they do not have the potential to become independent. It was also reported that for these children it would be beneficial for both parents and the child if admitted to monasteries as a monk. Having the child admitted as a monk relieves parents from the burden of looking after their children all time as the monasteries take charge of the children.

11: Children’s choice

For some children particularly with learning difficulties they opted to be out of school and reported that it was waste of time and money. For instance, Mother B said, “He said it was a

waste of money as I have intellectual problems". Similarly, for some parents their adult children who were placed along with children smaller than them did not want to go to school because they felt uncomfortable because of the age gap. As one of the fathers reported, "He said that he is a bit older than his classmates and he said he feels shy".

Findings that emerged from interviews with Principals, SENCO, teachers and officials from Ministry of Education:

12. Untrained teachers

The study revealed that SEN teachers in general lack confidence in their ability to teach SEN children effectively. They are of the opinion that they do not possess adequate knowledge and professional expertise to teach children with disabilities:

We had this madam Namgay's (name changed) daughter with me. I had a tough time and I had to hold her and I had to lock the class, and write on the board and that's how I used to teach because if not then she will fight with other students or do something.

These teachers attributed their shortfall of expertise in dealing children with disabilities as a major reason that caused for dropping out of school. In depth discussions with these teachers bring to light that most of them had only as much as a week-long training or at the most some received two weeks' training on SEN.

Another possible reason for students with disabilities dropping out of school is also attributed to general teachers teaching SEN students. Students with milder learning disabilities attend general classrooms and are taught by teachers who have had no training on SEN at all. Therefore, the children with SEN remained ignored.

Similarly, it was discussed that due to lack of trained teachers the students with severe behavioral disabilities were locked in classrooms most of the time due to the fact that either there were no professionals or shortage of professionals to support these group of students. Gradually these students dropped out of the school.

13. Large class size affected student retention in SEN schools

Due to inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, individual attention and one on one intervention by teachers for a classroom size of 35-40 students was not

possible. A school principal voiced, “classroom strength cannot be properly managed, and we have to fit in all the students we get regardless of the policies that are there”. Therefore, most of the time, these group of students were left unattended in terms of appropriate support as required.

Similarly, for those students placed in self-contained classrooms though ideally, by international standards the size of the class in SEN schools ranges from 3-10 depending on the severity of disability the policy has been framed to limit the number of students to 18 in a class. However, it is evident that the number of students far exceeds the set limit. The overcrowding has definitely contributed to children either dropping out or wanting to drop out of school.

14. Inaccessible infrastructure resulted in children dropping out of SEN school

Inaccessible infrastructure has been observed to be another detrimental factor that has contributed to schools not being able to attract and retain students with disabilities. Due to this lack of physical accessibility for both the SEN schools, children with disabilities mainly physical disability have been discouraged from enrolling or discontinue after enrolling for a couple of years. Accessing education due to inaccessible infrastructure is a subject of concern that needs addressing as early as possible.

However, it has been reported that these schools are supported by Ministry of Education in making it accessible where possible by providing funds and expertise. For instance, installation of ramps and construction of accessible toilets were some of the physical structures that were made available in these schools. However, despite the support the challenges still remain as an official from Ministry of Education remarked, “the Education Ministry has been providing a budget to improve accessibility for children with disabilities, but many of the buildings are still not accessible to children with disabilities”.

15. Absence of proper school transition programs for students with disabilities

The existing SEN schools in Bhutan do not have a proper transition programs to high schools, university and vocational training centers. There is neither a policy nor a mechanism in place to ensure that students with disabilities after completing middle school and high school have access to vocational training centers and tertiary education. It is reported that most of the students with disabilities drop out from middle school and stay at

home. For fortunate few who live in the capital city get enrolled in the only vocational center, Draktsho Vocational Training Center for Children with SEN.

It is also reported that the Ministry of Education currently have no future plans for supporting transitioning of students with disabilities to university education. Once a child graduates from SEN school they don't have a clear policy and directions for transition. Therefore, parents as well as the child do not know where to continue with their education. Unless a system is put in place this drop out will remain.

16. Curriculum for children with disabilities

Interviews with SEN teachers revealed that until 2021, children with SEN followed the same curricula as any other children in the regular school, which was believed to be a major factor in children failing their promotion examinations repeatedly and therefore making it vulnerable for these group of children wanting to leave school. Both teachers and parents viewed this not only as unfriendly but also some kind of negligence on the part of the people responsible for SEN education.

17. Attitude towards children with disabilities (marginalized)

Marginalizing children with disabilities was found to be yet another reason for children dropping out of school. Despite all kinds of efforts schools put in, it was observed that children with disabilities were often marginalized. SEN teachers assert that the issue is not just within the boundaries of school and classrooms. Teachers claimed that parents themselves are not very positive about their own children.

SEN teachers and coordinators believe that the education level of people and their attitude towards children living with disabilities really matter. Some parents hide their child's disability or they even deny it. An uneducated parent either denied or unaware of her child with a learning disability. Such a negative attitude can be an open barrier that keeps children with disabilities out of school., Graham (2014); Policy and Planning Division (2018). Some are due to parent's wishes to let their child join monks or nuns.

18. Age and physical maturity

Interview respondents amongst staff members from SEN schools shared that it is difficult to retain students with disabilities in schools after they become adolescents. When adolescents reach the transitional stage of physical and psychological development find themselves out of place. They develop a sense of misfit in themselves. SEN teachers say that it is at this period when all efforts from their side fail to retain adolescents with SEN in schools.

The SENCOs also shared that these adolescents begin to understand the age difference between them and their younger peers in the mainstream classroom. Further, the management of SEN schools also expressed that the education policy encourages adolescents with disabilities to transition out of the school system. This policy, according to a SEN coordinator is to ensure that adolescents with disabilities learn to cope in the world outside school campus.

19. Wide range of disabilities and not being able to cater to children's needs

The other pertinent reason for children with disabilities dropping out of school is because SEN schools in Bhutan are at the beginning phase and are not able to cater to the varying needs of disabilities. SEN schools currently are ill-equipped particularly in terms of human resources and expertise. Most SEN teachers said that they have just the bare minimum knowledge and understanding about one or two types of disabilities. As a consequence, SEN teachers expressed their inability to provide appropriate support to children that come to school with varying needs.

Recommendations and implications

From the aforementioned findings it is evident that there are recommendations and implications on at least two aspects in supporting OOSCD and their parents – policy and practice.

Policy

Although progress has been made in inclusion of children with disabilities in schools that support SEN programmes in Bhutan, there is still a lot that remains to be addressed particularly for OOSCD. It is worth noting that policies that explicitly address OOSCD of

what, where, how, who and why aspects have nowhere been indicated in the existing policies such as National Policy for Persons with Disability 2019, Standards for Inclusive Education 2017, and National Education Policy (Draft 2022).

The implementation of inclusive education and the provision of services for children with a disability in developing countries has remained in its nascent stage due to the absence of mandatory policies and laws that influence the provision of these services (Charema, 2007; Mutepfa, Mpofu, & Chataika, 2007). Thus, in the absence of any mandatory requirements specifying what is to be provided, by whom, how, when and where, a laissez faire attitude prevails in the provision of services for children with a disability in many developing countries (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002).

Policy development has been found to be central to the successful implementation of inclusive education and services for children with disability in a number of countries. Carrington et al., (2016) assert that the promotion of inclusive education and support services for children with a disability requires a clearly stated policy, and Hardy and Woodcock (2015), drawing upon research undertaken in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, concluded that “policy matters” (p. 143). In addition, there is consistent evidence on the effect of mandatory policies and laws on service provision (Bines & Lei, 2011; Charema, 2007; Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012), and Obiakor and Eleweke (2014, p. 384) remind us that these “powerful orders must be obeyed” to ensure that services required have been provided and monitored for the benefit of children with disability. Therefore, it is suggested that stakeholders such as Ministry of Education, NGOs that support people living with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, people living with disabilities, parliamentarians and other relevant agencies collaborate in formulation of policies and adoption in addressing the needs of OOSCD.

Practice

Out of several practical implications derived, some of the most prominent findings from this study are as follows:

1. For most of the parents who were economically disadvantaged and had children with severe disabilities are at the highest risk of leaving the school. These group of parents were not able to assist as caregivers for supporting their children as required by the schools. This has implication for the child leaving the school gradually and being kept at

home resulting as a liability for the family and the nation. Therefore, it is recommended that schools employ teacher assistants to support these children and relieve parents from staying at school as caregivers.

2. Transition to next level for adult children with disabilities was another impeding issue that led to these youths dropping out of school and staying at home. Currently, appropriate transition programmes for adult children and graduates with disabilities in high schools, particularly with severe disabilities is minimal. It is suggested that schools, Ministry of Education, NGOs that support disability, parents and children with disabilities come together and explore possibilities of appropriate transition programmes and formulate policies for future implementation.
3. Physical accessibility was another significant factor that contributed to children dropping out of school, particularly for children with physical disabilities. Bhutan's geographic topographical conditions and the absence of ramps, accessible toilets and classrooms in schools deterred children with physical disabilities coming to school. Therefore, it is recommended that the schools address physical accessibility with reasonable accommodation and modifications by providing ramps, constructing accessible toilets and classrooms.
4. Lack of trained SEN teachers in the schools have huge practical implications in retaining children with disabilities in schools. It was evident that almost all the parents of OOSCD and youth with disabilities reported that there was not much support and progress in their children attending the school due to untrained teachers who were not able to provide appropriate support as required. It is recommended that these schools employ trained professional SEN teachers who can provide appropriate intervention support depending on the need of children with varying disabilities.

Finally, it is evident that as a result of this project implementation, the public schools and NGOs that support disability have started collaborating in supporting the needs of OOSCD and out of school youth with disabilities though initially these schools and centers were working in isolation. Further, these schools and the centers have started sharing resources in terms of experts and physical resources required for intervention programmes where applicable. Therefore, it is recommended that these institutions work in collaboration to support OOSCD and out of school youth with disabilities and look for opportunities to innovate ideas for scalability and sustainability in the future.

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