

# The Experiences of Learners with Disabilities in Mainstream Vocational Training in Nepal

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## Abstract

**Context:** This article explores the lived experiences of learners with disabilities who were attending short-term skills-based training programs in Nepal. The research questions addressed were how the learners with disabilities had been experiencing learning with their peers without disabilities and whether the vocational training was inclusive from the perspectives of learners with disabilities.

**Approach:** Based on a phenomenological design, eight learners with disabilities were purposively selected. In-depth interviews were held with the participants. Data were collected in the forms of audiotaped recordings, field notes, and institutional records. The thematic analysis technique was employed to explicate the transcribed data.

**Results:** The results showed that learners with disabilities faced difficulty in commuting to and from the training center. The physical learning environment was insufficiently accessible, and this affected the learning of students with disabilities. Although the learners with physical disabilities had no problem in understanding the subject matter taught in the mainstream classrooms, the learners with visual impairments and those who were with hard of hearing had, at times, difficulty in following their instructors. The learners with disabilities had trouble with socialization and with forming friendships though they had supportive instructors. The participants' statements revealed that the existing inclusion practices were not enough to address the needs of persons with disabilities. However, they viewed inclusion as a much better option to cater to the needs of differently abled people.

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**Conclusion:** Inclusive technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is in practice throughout the world. This qualitative research paper has presented the perspectives of learners with disabilities (LWDs) about the inclusive practices in the Nepalese TVET sector. More importantly, this study has given a voice to the LWDs from mainstream vocational training centers in Nepal.

**Keywords:** VET, Vocational Education and Training, Learners with Disabilities, Mainstream, Experience, Nepal

## 1 Introduction

Disability is a form of diversity (Dunn & Andrews, 2015), and inclusion is a way of bringing together and harnessing diversity (Arzola, 2008). Inclusion focuses on the needs of every learner and calls for respecting their differences (British Council, 2014). The right to an inclusive education demands that all mainstream educational institutions welcome all the learners and adapt their infrastructure and services to meet the needs of every learner (Cigman, 2010).

Many educators and disability activists agree that inclusion in mainstream educational institutes is the appropriate way to provide education and training to all kinds of learners (United Nations Children's Fund, 2003). Following the spirit of the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the Salamanca Statement (1994), the World Education Forum (2000), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), Nepal started addressing the issue of the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education and training (Regmi, 2017).

In Nepal, the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT), functionally under the Ministry of Education, has been working as the main agency to provide long-term and short-term TVET programs. The TVET policy of 2012 provides guidelines for systematizing TVET provisions in Nepal (Ministry of Education, 2012). The key policy areas are the expansion of TVET programs, inclusion and access in TVET, the integration of various TVET modes and pathways, and sustainable financing. CTEVT has been running its programs and services based on this policy. Apart from CTEVT, more than a dozen ministries and other non-governmental organizations also provide various kinds of TVET programs in the country.

In this context, this paper has explored the lived experiences of learners with disabilities who were undergoing short-term skill-based training programs in different vocational training centers. The research questions for the study were (a) how have the learners with disabilities experienced learning with their peers without disabilities in mainstream vocational training programs? and (b) are the existing mainstream vocational training programs inclusive from their perspectives?

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Concept of Disability

There are numerous definitions of the term disability. The definitions vary based on their purposes and accordingly highlight different conceptual elements (Altman, 2014). The World Health Organization (WHO) provides a relatively more comprehensive definition of disability that it is an umbrella term for a person's impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions (2001, p. 3). An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations (ibid, p. 10).

The definition of disability varies from country to country as well. Different definitions may coexist side by side even within a country. In the context of Nepal, the Human Rights for Persons with Disabilities Act, 2017 has adopted the definition of disability as given in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) - persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (International Labor Organization, 2016; Nepal Law Commission, n.d.). The Act has classified disability from two perspectives. The first classification is based on the nature of the problem and difficulty in the parts of the body and in the physical system:

- i Physical disability
- ii Disability related to vision
- iii Disability related to hearing
- iv Deaf-blind
- v Disability related to voice and speech
- vi Mental or psychosocial disability
- vii Intellectual disability
- viii Hemophilia
- ix Autism
- x Multiple disabilities

The second classification is based on the degree of dependency. They are as given below.

- i Complete disability: It is the condition where there is difficulty in carrying out daily activities even with the continuous assistance of others.

- ii Severe disability: It is the condition of having to continuously take other people's assistance in order to carryout individual daily activities and to take part in social activities.
- iii Moderate disability: It is the condition of being able to perform daily activities by self with or without taking other's support, if the physical facilities are available and if there are opportunities of training and education.
- iv Mild disability: It is the situation where taking part in regular daily activities and social activities by self is possible if there are no social and environmental obstacles.

This paper has followed the definition and classification of disability as given in the Act because it would help the researcher to find out the persons with disabilities and determine the type of their disability.

## **2.2 Empirical Studies**

An exploratory phenomenological study was conducted to understand how children with disabilities experience their participation in mainstream schools in Portugal (Pereira, la Cour, Jonsson, & Hemmingsson, 2010). Participation in school activities is an important aspect of learners' inclusion in mainstream schools. The study revealed three forms of participation – equal participation, special task participation and onlooker participation – and one form of non-participation, in which the learners felt completely excluded.

A study of the experience of an inclusive school education for learners with disabilities (LWDs) in Nepal showed that the LWDs had been facing difficulties in learning due to a lack of adequate disability-friendly resources and infrastructure in the public schools (Save the Children Norway-Nepal, 2004). In addition to the inadequacy of support systems, the study revealed that learners with disabilities were experiencing difficulty in travelling to and from their schools.

Another study on the experience of children with disabilities (CWDs) in school settings in the context of Vietnam revealed that the CWDs' most important difficulties were related to learning facilities, empathy from their peers and barriers caused by the physical environment (Tran, 2014). The study showed that most of the respondents' understanding of disability was based on the medical and individual model. The CWDs were found to be dealing with the difficulties by trying to adapt themselves.

Borland and James (1999) conducted a case study exploring the social and learning experiences of students with disabilities in a UK university. Four areas were found to be most important for students with disabilities: disclosure, access, quality assurance and the moral basis of the institution's disabilities policy. It was found that the students were found to be asked to disclose information about their disability at different stages, but the information they provided was not properly utilized. Some of the students with disabilities had problems in accessing buildings and other physical infrastructures. They had problems with transportation and the use of equipment. Lip readers had problems watching the lecturer and taking notes at the same time. Students with visual impairments had difficulty reading the white boards. The quality assurance system was

not found to be robust from the perspectives of the students with disabilities. Although the university's policy regarding disabilities was based on the social model, most of the staff and students' views on disability was found to be based on the medical model of disability (Borland & James, 1999).

As friendship is an important aspect of inclusion, some studies have explored the friendship experiences of learners with disabilities. These studies have highlighted that physical inclusion does not necessarily lead to social inclusion. The students' experiences of friendship are shaped by the values, beliefs, and customs of the education system, staff, and students (Morrison & Burgman, 2009). Academic achievement seemed to facilitate the learners with disabilities identifying themselves as the accepted members of the class. One study has showed that students with special education needs (SEN) experience more loneliness at school (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2012). Another study has also revealed that students with disabilities often experience difficulties in being accepted by peers and developing friendships (de Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2013).

### **2.3 Policy on Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education, which has emerged since the early 1990s (Armstrong, 2008), is a key policy objective for the education of learners with disabilities in many countries (Lindsay, 2007). The declaration of the Salamanca Statement and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (CRPD) both form an important basis for the start of inclusion policies across the world including Nepal (de Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2013). Accordingly, the government of Nepal has developed policies to provide inclusive education and training to all.

The new constitution of Nepal, which came into effect in 2015, has envisaged the right of citizens with disabilities to get free education up to the higher level. In addition, it has guaranteed the right of visually impaired citizens and citizens with hearing or speaking impairments to get free education through brail script and sign language, respectively (Ministry of Law, Justice & Parliamentary Affairs, 2015). The Education Act and the School Sector Development Plan (2016-2022) have focused on the inclusive education of students with disabilities. Although the government of Nepal is criticized for adopting the donor-defined concept of inclusive education (Maudslay, 2014), it has recently implemented the new inclusive education policy for persons with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2016).

In the context of Technical and Vocational Education and Training, the government has been implementing the TVET Policy since 2012, and the government has highlighted access and equity in TVET (Ministry of Education, 2012). The government has started scholarship and incentive programs for learners with disabilities to increase their access to TVET.

### **2.4 Theory of Inclusion**

The term 'inclusion' replaced 'integration' and is often contrasted with 'exclusion'. In its broadest sense, inclusion promotes the active participation of all regardless of race, ethnicity, caste, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, socio-economic status, and any other aspect of an individual's identity that might be perceived as different (Polat, 2011). In the study of disability, inclusion means that people with and without

disabilities participate in an activity together and interact on an equal basis (International Labor Organization, 2013). In the educational setting, inclusion emphasizes the placement of learners who display one or more disabilities in age-appropriate classrooms together with needed accommodations and supports (Arzola, 2008). The aim of inclusion is to empower marginalized people to take advantage of opportunities (World Bank, 2013).

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Study Design

A phenomenological approach was adopted for the purpose of this study, as the researcher wanted to gain personal insight into the lived experiences of participants (Flood, 2010). The objective of phenomenology is to understand human experience (Dowling, 2007; Wilson, 2015). This study has explored the experiences of learners with disabilities who were undergoing mainstream vocational training.

#### 3.2 Sampling

The study participants were purposively selected in this study. To be included in the study, the persons with disabilities must have been undergoing vocational training courses. Participants who voluntarily wanted to take part in the study were selected. The details of the participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Information about Research Participants

Participants	Gender	Type of disability	Age	Caste/Ethnic group <sup>1</sup>	Training attended
Kapil	M	Hard of hearing	26	Brahmin	Building electrician
Renu	F	Blind	18	Hill Dalit	Knitting
Pushpa	F	Physical (short stature)	25	Hill Janajati	Beautician
Champa	F	Physical (leg)	30	Chhetri	Tailoring
Hari	M	Physical (hand)	23	Brahmin	Automobile mechanic
Khadga	M	Physical (leg)	23	Brahmin	Mobile repairing
Babita	F	Physical (leg)	32	Chhetri	Tailoring
Gita	F	Physical (leg)	20	Hill Janajati	Tailoring

<sup>1</sup>The classification of caste/ethnic groups is based on the report 'Population situation analysis of Nepal' published by United Nations Population Fund in 2017.

Three male and five female participants took part in the study. They were attending different short-term vocational training programs. They were participating in the training at five different vocational training centers (VTCs) located in the Kathmandu valley. Two VTCs were government-owned and the other three VTCs were non-governmental. All the respondents were receiving the training at no cost to themselves.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

The data collection involved in-depth face-to-face interviews to gain an understanding of the experiences of the learners with disabilities in mainstream vocational training. For this, semi-structured interview guidelines were prepared. Consent to carry out the study was obtained first from the management of the vocational training provider and then from the students with disabilities. In-depth interviews were held only with those students who agreed to participate in the study. Each in-depth interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audiotaped. The medium of communication between the researcher and the participants was the Nepali language. At least one face-to-face meeting was held with each participant even after conducting the in-depth interviews in order to maintain rigor in the study. The prolonged interaction with the participants helped to collect the detailed (thick) and comprehensive descriptions.

Data for this study were also collected in the forms of field notes and institutional records. The field notes were made before, during and after the in-depth interviews. The information provided by the vocational training provider in the form of institutional records helped me to understand the context even better.

### **3.4 Explication of the Data**

A considerable amount of time was spent repeatedly listening to the recordings and transcribing them in Nepali. The field notes were repeatedly read and converted into fuller texts. All the transcribed data obtained from the in-depth interviews were then translated from Nepali into English with the help of an English language expert. The thematic analysis technique was employed to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were read several times to analyze the narrative threads, tensions, and themes that emerged. Bracketing and peer debriefing techniques were adopted to minimize my personal biases in the study. Pseudonyms were used in the presentation to protect the participants' anonymity.

## **4 Results**

With regard to the first research question, three themes appeared while analyzing the data: teaching-learning process, access to VET, and inclusion by other students and teaching staff.

#### 4.1 Teaching-Learning Process

The participants' experiences about the teaching-learning process revealed three sub-themes: feeling of being a minority in the mainstream, collision between teaching style and learning style, and insufficiently disability-friendly learning environment.

##### *Minority in Mainstream Classroom*

The learners with disabilities formed a minority in the mainstream classroom. In all the cases, the learners without disabilities outnumbered the learners with disabilities. In most of the cases, there was only one learner with disability in the classroom. Gita (a 20-year old female learner with a physical disability who was attending the tailoring training) said that she was worried in the beginning of the training because she thought that people would treat her differently in the group. Sharing her jittery feelings, she said:

*I felt uneasy in the beginning of the training. I used to think that there would be people without disabilities. I thought I was the only person with a disability in the group. I was worried what other people would say about me. Later, I knew that there was another sister with a physical disability. Then, I felt I found my friend.*

##### *Collision between Learning Style and Teaching Style*

The learners with disabilities had mixed feelings about their teachers' teaching style. Those learners who had a physical disability said that they did not have any difficulty in understanding the subject matter that was taught. However, some of them had difficulty in performing the tasks. On the other hand, those learners who had visual and hearing impairments had, to some extent, difficulties in understanding the subject matter taught. In this connection, Renu (an 18-year old female learner with a visual impairment in the knitting training) expressed:

*I frequently hear our instructor saying "yi yaslai yasari chhiraunu parchha"<sup>2</sup> and "aba yaha yaso garnu parchha"<sup>3</sup>. Since I cannot see the things, I have difficulty in understanding the subject matter being taught.*

Kapil (a 26-year old male learner who is hard of hearing in the building electrician training) also had difficulty in following his instructor. Since he was hard of hearing, I communicated with him in writing. With regard to the teaching style of the instructor, one excerpt of our written communication follows:

*I: Do you need additional support to learn? If yes, what kinds of support do you need?*

*Kapil: My friends without disabilities might understand from the teacher's speech. However, I have difficulty in hearing, so I have to observe things.*

<sup>2</sup>A Nepali sentence meaning 'It should be inserted here in this way'.

<sup>3</sup>A Nepali sentence meaning 'Now you have to work here in this way'.

*I learn things from drawings and visual materials. I learn the skill through observation. If there are visuals in the class, I find it easy to learn. Generally, I sit on the first bench so that I can clearly observe what the instructor is doing.*

*I: Can you lip-read with your instructor?*

*Kapil: Yes, I can. But I have to be facing the instructor at a close distance. But instructors keep on moving around the classroom. They don't always stand in front of me to speak.*

Learners with physical disabilities had no difficulty in following their instructors as they could see and hear. However, they had to some extent difficulty in performing the tasks. For example, Pushpa (a 25-year old female learner with short stature in the beautician training) had difficulty in performing some tasks such as threading eyebrows and cutting hair. Her instructor used to provide her with a stool to stand on so that she could perform such tasks.

#### *Insufficiently Disability-friendly Learning Environment*

The participants expressed that the learning environment could have been made more accessible. The participants with impaired legs had difficulty in accessing the classrooms that were upstairs. They also had difficulty in using the toilets. Khadga (a 23-year old male learner in the mobile repairing training) had a physical disability. He walked with crutches. However, his class was on the second floor of the building. He had to climb up the stairs on crutches. He expressed his difficulty while undergoing the training:

*Although I can reach the class with some difficulty on crutches, it is not accessible for wheelchair users. Moreover, the toilet is not accessible for persons with a physical disability. There is a toilet with a squatting pan. People such as me can hardly sit on such toilets. Moreover, the bolt is on the top of part of the door. Therefore, it is difficult to close the door of the toilet.*

Champa, Babita and Gita had similar views with respect to the physical infrastructures of their training centers. Kapil (a 26-year old male learner with a hearing impairment in the building electrician training) had a different experience. Because of the lack of clear instruction, he got electric shocks for a couple of times. He added:

*The place where I had to perform the practical activities did not have clear instructions about safety. Because of the lack of clear instructions, I got electric shocks a couple of times. Then, I became very conscious of following the instructions. I started asking for such instructions from my instructors before performing a new task.*

Babita (a 32-year old female learner with a physical impairment in the tailoring training) shared another kind of experience. She had to come to the training center and leave her

baby at home. She said that she could have brought the baby with her if there had been a child care unit. She added that other female learners who had small babies could join the training if there was a child care unit.

## 4.2 Access to VET

Most of the participants expressed that they had difficulty in accessing the vocational training center. They shared their experiences of difficulties in travelling to and from the training center.

### *Difficulty in Commuting to and from the Training Center*

Almost all of the learners faced difficulties in travelling to and from the training center. They clearly expressed that their learning was affected by their worries and anxieties regarding reaching home safely from the training center. Renu (an 18-year old female learner with a visual impairment in the knitting training) travelled from her residence to the training center partly on foot and partly by bus. She said:

*I come to the training center by bus. I have to walk for about five minutes from my room to the bus stop. After getting off the bus, I have to walk again for a similar distance from the bus stop to the training venue... at Anamnagar<sup>4</sup>. Now I can travel alone with the help of a cane... While travelling by bus, I request the “khalasi”<sup>5</sup> to manage a reserved seat for the PWDs... The public vehicles sometimes do not stop for people like me. Those “gadiwala”<sup>6</sup> feel irritated because they have to help us get on the vehicle, manage seats for us, and help get off their vehicle.*

Babita (a 32-year old female learner with a physical disability in the tailoring training) used to travel a long distance every day. She had an impaired leg. She shared her difficulty in travelling to and from the training center:

*I come here leaving a small kid at home. I live in Budhanilkantha<sup>7</sup>. I have to change two buses to come here from my home. The public buses are generally overcrowded during office hours. Moreover, we sometimes have to suffer through terrible traffic jams. It’s very difficult to get a seat. Although there are reserved seats for persons with disabilities, such seats are often occupied by persons without disabilities. Most people without disabilities leave their seats when they see me in front of them. However, some people do not readily leave the seats... I have come here from Budhanilkantha standing in the aisle of a bus two/three times. I stood on the bus thinking that I would not die. My worries are how to arrive at the training center and then safely reach home.*

<sup>4</sup>A place in Kathmandu.

<sup>5</sup>A Nepali term to referring to a helper in public vehicles.

<sup>6</sup>A Nepali term to referring to individuals who own the vehicles or who work in public vehicles such as drivers and their helpers.

<sup>7</sup>A place in Kathmandu.

Kapil and Hari had also said that they had difficulty in reaching the training center and going back home. Travelling to and from the training center was perceived as a major stress inducing factor by the participants.

### 4.3 Inclusion by Other Students and Teaching Staff

The participants' expressions constituted another major theme about the behaviors of students without disabilities and teaching staff. This theme covered three sub-themes: difficulty in socialization with peers, sympathetic friends, and positive as well as ambivalent feeling towards instructors' behavior.

#### *Difficulty in Socialization with Friends without Disabilities*

One of the participants had a bitter experience learning with friends without disabilities about socialization with friends without disabilities. Pushpa (a 25-year old female learner with short stature who was attending the beautician training) shared her experience:

*I am the only person with a disability in the group. Sometimes, I feel a little bit lonely. My classmates have their own cliques. At the break time, they go for snacks in their own groups. I tried to join them a couple of times. But I felt that they did not like me. Although they did not say anything offensive to me, they used to avoid me indirectly. When I asked them to go for snacks, they used to give different excuses for being unable to go with me. Then, I felt I was not welcome in their circle. Therefore, I started going for snacks alone...I do not say anything to anybody. I have realized that I have to concentrate on my own tasks.*

#### *Sympathetic Friends*

Some participants stated that their friends without disabilities treated them sympathetically. The learners with disabilities perceived that some of their friends without disabilities exhibited compassion and concerns for their sufferings and difficulties. Babita (a 32-year old female participant with a physical disability in the tailoring training) said:

*One day, I arrived late to the classroom due to a traffic jam. I entered the class and clarified why I was late to my instructor. Some of my friends said "bichara"<sup>8</sup>. I felt uneasy. I thought anyone can be the victim of the traffic problem. They do not say bichara to others, but why do they call me so? However, I said nothing at that time.*

#### *Positive as Well as Ambivalent about Instructors' Behavior*

Most of the participants felt that their instructors were very friendly and supportive. They perceived their instructors' behavior as caring. Babita (a 32-year old female learner with a physical disability who was attending the tailoring training) said:

<sup>8</sup>This word is used to show sympathy to those who are helpless or poor. Some people accept it easily, and some may feel they are being undermined.

*The instructors are very friendly. They are very supportive. In the beginning of the training, they said that all the participants were equal in the classroom. They have behaved equally to all. People used to say that the instructors were very strict. But, I have never felt like that.*

However, two participants had different opinions about the behavior of their instructors. Gita (a 20-year old female learner with a physical disability in the tailoring training) was in a quandary about her instructors' behavior. She said:

*We are receiving the training for free. There is another group of ladies that pay for the training. Both training events are running simultaneously. The instructors are the same. If one instructor is in our group, another instructor will be in the other group. I personally feel that they care more about the paying group than ours. Actually I do not mean to say that my instructors have behaved badly towards me. They have never done so to me. They are supportive. However, they provide more time to the other group.*

Hari (a 23-year old male participant with a physical disability in the automobile mechanic training) said that their training center had abundant resources. He expressed that the instructors were like friends. He perceived that his friends were not serious about their learning. Although the instructors were very friendly, they sometimes arrived late or left sessions early. None of Hari's friends complained about the instructors' behaviors. Once, his instructor left early. Hari's friends then closed the door and started playing cards in the classroom. He was the only person who did not like that and did not participate in the game. Here follows an excerpt from the in-depth interview with Hari:

*I: Then, didn't you complain about the behaviors of your friends and instructors?*

*Hari: No, I could not.*

*I: Why?*

*Hari: The instructors are the employees of the training center. Nobody can do anything to them. They are "thulabada"<sup>9</sup> and "pahunchwala"<sup>10</sup> people. I thought there was no point in complaining about the instructors.*

*I: What about your friends?*

*Hari: Most of them are the local people. I think they are not serious in their learning. They come to the training center just to pass the time. Even the instructors are aware of the misdeeds of the learners.*

*I: Why don't the instructors do anything about them?*

*Hari: The training is just for six months. After that, the learners will leave the place. The instructors might have thought of tolerating their misbehavior for some time. "Murkha ka aghi daiba dara"<sup>11</sup>. That's it.*

<sup>9</sup>A Nepali adjective that denotes people belonging to a high class or positions with power

<sup>10</sup>In the Nepali language, people who have access to powerful people are called pahunchwala.

<sup>11</sup>A Nepali idiom that literally means even the god is afraid of the fool.

#### 4.4 Inclusion from the Perspectives of Learners with Disabilities

With regard to the second research question, the participants expressed their views on the existing inclusion practices in the mainstream vocational training programs. Three major themes appeared while analyzing the data: supporting mainstreaming and inclusion, struggling for inclusion, and way forward.

##### *Supporting Mainstreaming and Inclusion*

Pushpa and Khadga were associated with organizations that provide aid for the persons with disabilities. Other participants were not associated with any such organizations. Comparatively, Pushpa and Khadga more strongly supported the idea of mainstreaming and inclusion as they had been advocating for such concepts. All the participants supported the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream vocational training.

Pushpa (a 25-year old female learner with short stature in the beautician training) was pursuing a bachelor's degree in education. She emphasized the importance of vocational training for the persons with disabilities. According to her, it would help people to be self-reliant, as it is intended to help the learner get employed. However, she did not believe there was full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the vocational training sector. During the in-depth interview, she shared one bitter experience about inclusion:

*I visited some other training centers to help some of my friends with disabilities during the training. However, some of the people who worked in those training centers told me that the vocational training programs were suitable only for people without disabilities. They said the learners in vocational training had to perform tasks, which would be difficult for the persons with disabilities. This type of negative attitude towards the persons with disabilities is still in place. We have the challenge of breaking this pattern of thinking. Only then will there be an inclusive learning environment for the persons with disabilities.*

Khadga (a 23-year old male learner with a physical disability in the mobile repairing training) was doing a bachelor's degree. He was associated with some organizations that advocate for the persons with disabilities. He strongly supported the idea of inclusion for PWDs in vocational training. He said:

*I think two things are to be considered when including the persons with disabilities in the vocational training programs. First, we need to match the vocational training with the type of disability of the candidate. For example, I have taken mobile repairing training as it can be done sitting on a chair. This training is also suitable for wheelchair users. The training programs such as off-season vegetable farming and building electrician are less appropriate for me. Persons with visual impairments can be included in music training. A second thing to consider is the severity of the disability. People with the same kind of disability again differ in terms of the severity of the disability. So, mainstreaming and inclusion should not be understood as just*

*mixing up all kinds of people together. It's about discovering the individual's potential and placing the right person in the right place.*

#### *Struggling for Inclusion*

Champa (a 30-year old female learner with a physical disability in the tailoring training) said that she got information about a vocational training provider who was providing free tailoring training targeting the disadvantaged groups of people. Then, she applied for the training. The vocational training provider held interviews with the applicants and selected the participants for the training. Champa was not in the published list of participants. Then, she went to the administration and complained that they did not include any of the persons with disabilities in the list. She argued with the administrative personnel. They decided to include her and publish an amended list. She further added:

*I had to quarrel with the administration to convince them that they had to include persons with disabilities. I warned them that I would pass this issue on to the concerned bodies. Only then were they willing to accept me. If I had not spoken strongly, I would not have gotten the chance to attend the training. . . Although the government has rules and regulations to provide such opportunities to persons with disabilities, the employees at the training centers sometimes give preference to their friends and relatives.*

#### *Way Forward for Inclusion*

Gita (a 20-year old female learner with a physical disability in the tailoring training) felt that her instructors provided more assistance to the participants in the groups that paid fees in contrast to her subsidized group. However, she had a positive point to make about the existing inclusive practices. She stated:

*There is another person with a physical disability in my class. I have seen other people with disabilities in other trades. I think it is better to teach learners with and without disabilities together. However, there are many things that need to be done to make it fully inclusive. For example, arranging classrooms in the accessible places and providing disability-friendly toilets. . . We have to be optimistic. Things are gradually changing. . . not as we expected. Things are happening at a snail's pace.*

Babita (a 32-year old female learner with a physical disability in the tailoring training) and Kapil (a 26-year old male learner with a hearing impairment in the building electrician training) made some similar points. First, they said that the learners with disabilities would not feel segregated and different if they were taught in the mainstream learning environment. Second, inclusion would work better if the learners' level of understanding and potential were identified before forming the training groups.

## **5 Discussion**

This article explores the experiences of learners with disabilities who were in mainstream vocational training programs in Nepal. The vocational education and training (VET) is

a powerful tool for fostering social inclusion (Nilsson, 2010) and inclusive VET leads to the creation of a more inclusive society (Ferrier & Smith, 2010).

The learners with disabilities constituted a minority in the mainstream classrooms. This work relates to the minority group model of disability. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also designates persons with disabilities as the world's largest minority (Kanter, 2015). Social minorities have been systematically discriminated against in all areas of life (Bickenbach, Chatterji, M, & Ustun, 1999; Ralston & Ho, 2010). Gita's account also shows her fear of the possibility of being oppressed because of being a part of minority in a mainstream classroom. She feared being marginalized and oppressed. According to Holt (1995), most child learners are afraid of the mockery and contempt of their peer group. Although Gita was not a child anymore, her account supported Holt as she was afraid of what her peers would say about her.

Babita and Gita, who were attending the same vocational training, perceived the behaviors of their instructors differently. Babita was happy with her instructors. She said her instructors' behavior was better than she expected. She was 'delighted' with the service of the instructors (Oliver, Rust, & Varki, 1997). Gita, on the other hand, was not satisfied with her instructors' behavior. From the perspective of equity theory, if individuals perceive that they have less than others, they feel injustice and are demotivated (Fadil, Williams, Limpaphayom, & Smatt, 2005; Bolino & Turnley, 2008). Gita compared her instructors' support and the time they devoted to her group to that of another group. She felt that her instructors provided more time and support to the other group. It caused a feeling of injustice for her. Thus, she was not satisfied with her instructors' behavior. It might have impacted on her motivation to learn.

Hari's account revealed that Max Weber's concept of social hierarchy and power (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008) prevented participants from complaining about the instructors' behavior. The learners suppressed their dissatisfaction with the instructors who were higher in the hierarchy than they were and so were perceived as having greater power. The instructors did not complain about the behaviors of their participants because those learners were the children of local people. Most of the instructors and employees of the training center were from outside of the valley. They remained silent against the power of the local people.

Pushpa felt that she was different from mainstream learners who were without disabilities. She was the only person with disabilities. She sensed that her classmates indirectly avoided her; they did not want to be her friends. She wanted somebody to share her feelings with and keep her company. In the in-depth interview, she states that no one liked to be with her. She felt powerless and dependent because of the 'alienation' (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008).

The social interactions between learners with disabilities and their peers can be regarded as the most essential dimension of social participation. Feeling accepted by peers and having friends is important in creating a positive learning experience. According to Shakespeare (2006), friendship is important for emotional, practical and even medical reasons. Pushpa's experience of having difficulty in being accepted by peers and forming friendships is supported by a number of studies (Bossart, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2012; de Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2013; Garrote, Dessemontet, & Opitz, 2017). These

studies found that children with disabilities were at risk of experiencing difficulties in their interactions with peers at school. Therefore, mere enrollment in mainstream classrooms was not enough to support the social participation of learners with disabilities. The study showed a need for interventions to enhance the social participation of learners with disabilities in the mainstream classrooms. Although the study was based on children with disabilities, Pushpa's account shows that it is true for adult learners with disabilities as well.

Although the learners with disabilities may have a greater need for friends, they are less likely to be well integrated into networks and friendship circles (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 170). In the context of VET, studies have shown that low levels of social support function as an obstacle in completing the course (Polidano & Mavromaras, 2011).

Most of the participants' statements revealed that they had sympathetic friends. Some of them perceived that their friends had thought of persons with disabilities as helpless objects of pity. It was the reason behind referring to them with the term *bichara*. It shows that thinking of their friends without disabilities was guided by the charity model of disability – viewing persons with disabilities as victims deserving pity (International Labor Organization, 2016). However, people such as Babita did not like such an emotional expression based on sympathy. They adhered to the paradigm shift of moving from charity to investment, from sympathy to rights, and from exclusion to inclusion (Lamichhane, 2015). They prefer to be treated as differently abled people.

Kapil's difficulty in performing lip reading and note taking simultaneously showed that his instructor's teaching style was not compatible with his individual learning style (Borland & James, 1999). Renu's difficulty in understanding her instructor's statements, which included many pronouns, also exhibited a mismatch between the teaching style and the learning style. Learning becomes effective when the instructor's teaching style matches the learner's learning style (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). In this connection, Vorhaus (2010) presents more than 71 models of learning styles and summarizes the learning styles of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) learners: In general, they are more visual than verbal, they prefer to watch and see rather than read and listen, they prefer to learn by doing and by practicing, they prefer learning in groups with instructor guidance, and they prefer to have a clear understanding of what is required of them. According to Ferrier and Smith (2010), many teaching staff at VET institutions do not have the required knowledge and skills about effective and appropriate teaching practices and other instructional strategies to support the students with disabilities. This study thus shows the need for mainstream classroom instructors to consider the learning style of individual learners.

The participants had difficulty in commuting to and from the training center. Although the government had provided persons with disabilities with free of cost vocational training programs, learners with disabilities had difficulty reaching the training centers. This study result is analogous to the findings of Save the Children Norway-Nepal (2004). Likewise, Malle, Pirttimaa, and Saloviita (2015) report that lack of transportation and adaptive educational materials or facilities in the training institute are the major barriers in the full and effective inclusion of students with disabilities in formal vocational education programs.

The participants' concern about accessible infrastructure relates to the rights-based

approach to disabilities. The right to equal access means that all members of the public should have equal access to facilities and resources open to the public (Williamson, 2015). It implies that the problem is not in the impairment or the body but in the social structures (Save the Children Norway-Nepal, 2004). In this connection, the Asian Development Bank (2014) states that the vocational training providers in Nepal are mostly under resourced and insufficiently disability-friendly although the short-term skills training for disadvantaged groups such as PWDs is expanding in the country.

The insufficient accessibility of learning environment, as described by the participants, has illuminated a gap in the inclusion of learners with disabilities in the vocational training sector (Tran, 2014). Inclusion is about a person's right to belong to her/his local mainstream educational institution, to be valued for who s/he is and to be provided with all the support s/he needs to thrive (Rieser, 2006). It is based on the principles of equality, equitable access, full participation, human dignity, and the acceptance of and respect for diversity (Kaffe, 2002). It is more than being at the same event, seeing the same thing, hearing the same thing, and doing the same thing. It is about people with and without disabilities experiencing the same thing at the same time, sharing in that experience and respecting others (Jordan, Carlile, & Stack, 2008; International Labor Organization, 2013).

The results show that the participants associated with organizations working for the PWDs strongly supported the idea of mainstreaming and inclusion. However, some of them had stereotypical understanding about the training or jobs for those with disabilities. Khadga's statement about inclusion is encouraging the placement of persons based on their disabilities, not their abilities and interest. This stereotypical understanding of training or jobs for those with disabilities perpetuates exclusion in another way (International Labor Organization, 2016).

The learners with disabilities were in agreement about the inclusion of PWDs in mainstream vocational training. In the course of in-depth interviews, they even shared their bitter experiences of exclusion. From their statements, we can gather that some people still believe that technical and vocational training programs are only for persons without disabilities. However, the participants were optimistic about to have easily accessible and fully inclusive vocational training centers in the future.

## **6 Conclusion**

This study attempted to give voice to learners with disabilities in mainstream vocational training centers. Their experiences of learning with persons without disabilities and their views on inclusion practices have reflected the existing situation of inclusion in the vocational training sector of Nepal. To make the training and educational systems more inclusive, most of the developed countries have revised their educational policies based on international statements, devised inclusive pedagogies, devised school structure to meet the needs of learners with disabilities, improved teacher training, and enhanced parental involvement (Srivastava, de Boer, & Pijl, 2015). This study has found a gap between existing inclusive educational policies and the practice in Nepal.

Although this study selected learners with different kinds of disabilities, further research can be conducted on the experiences and perspectives of learners with a particular type of disability. This study brought forward the stories of learners with disabilities in the mainstream vocational training setting. Further research can be conducted on the experiences of instructors who have been teaching in mainstream classes. Such research would help us to better understand the circumstances experienced by persons with disabilities in the TVET sector of Nepal.

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