**"Karma" and Human Rights: Bhutanese Teachers'
Perspectives on Inclusion and Disability.**

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Article Title: "Karma" and Human Rights: Bhutanese Teachers' Perspectives on Inclusion and Disability.

Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals call on countries to ensure that all children, especially the most vulnerable, are included in education. The small kingdom of Bhutan has clearly embraced inclusion in education at the policy level. However, research on inclusion and disability in this context is limited, and there are few studies focusing on the perspectives of Bhutanese teachers. The study presented in this article was led by the question 'how are Inclusion and Disability understood by teachers in Bhutan? The research aims were to a) explore the above concepts from the perspective of participants and b) construct these concepts in a way that is contextually relevant to Bhutan. Data collection comprised qualitative interviews with 15 Bhutanese teachers. Findings revealed that participants saw disability predominantly from a 'medical model' perspective, but at the same time held conflicting views as to what inclusion means. They moreover mentioned lack of teacher training as an obstacle to the implementation of inclusion in Bhutan, and some believed that the country is not yet ready for inclusion. We argue that our findings call for Bhutan to strengthen the preparation of its teachers for inclusive education in order to narrow the current gap between policy and practice.

(200)

Keywords: inclusion/inclusive education, disability/special educational needs, teacher understanding, Bhutan, South Asia

Introduction: Setting the Context

We are now over 20 years after the signing of the historic Salamanca Statement and

Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO 1994), which laid a strong

foundation for the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs/Disabilities (SEN/D)

in education around the world. Exactly 15 years after Dakar, when the international

community first committed to achieve Education for All (UNESCO 2000), the Sustainable

Development Goals were adopted by the United Nations (UN 2015) to highlight that more

work is still required in many countries, in order to ensure the participation in education of all

the world's children. With a population of approximately 775.000 people (World Bank 2015),

Bhutan is a small state on the Himalayas, bordering two much larger states, India and China.

Schuelka (2012) explains that since the 1960s, Bhutan has led laborious efforts to modernise

its traditionally Buddhist school system, within a much wider context of transformation,

development and modernisation of the entire country. In an article examining this encounter

of the traditional and modern systems of education in Bhutan, Phuntsho (2000, 97) notes that:

> 'this rapid development in modern education has brought about unprecedented changes in the
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> social, cultural, political and economic structures, and has in particular revolutionized the
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> education system.'

Bhutan has embraced inclusion in education with the signing of the Convention of the

Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990 and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (CRPD) in 2010. Moreover, it has adopted a National Policy on Special

Educational Needs, with the vision 'to strive towards a caring, inclusive and enabling society'

(Ministry of Education 2012, 7). Furthermore, Article 9.15 of the Constitution of Bhutan

(2008, 19) states:

2

'The State shall endeavour to provide education for the purpose of improving and increasing

knowledge, values and skills of the entire population with education being directed towards the

full development of the human personality.'

This striving for an education system for all -or 'inclusive of all'- is aligned with

Bhutan's wider emphasis on human rights and the unique concept of Gross National

Happiness (GNH), which guides Bhutan's development and is central to its education strategy

(Schuelka 2012). The GNH principle maintains some traditional Buddhist values, such as for

example the emphasis on spiritual, emotional, psychological and social development as

opposed to the accumulation of material wealth (The Centre for Bhutan Studies 2012).

According to the GNH philosophy, every citizen of Bhutan should enjoy equal rights in

political, economic, cultural, social and other aspects of life (Sherab 2014). Hence it seems

that the newer notion of inclusion in education fits perfectly with much older Buddhist

cultural values that continue to influence and shape the Bhutanese education system within a

wider context of modernisation (J. Dorji 2003, cited in Schuelka 2012).

Today several other policy documents seem to reflect inclusion as an important priority

of the Bhutanese education system (Schuelka 2012) and many Bhutanese classrooms have

seen an increasing number of students from diverse backgrounds, especially of those children

with disabilities (R. Dorji 2015). Furthermore, the Bhutanese education system seems to have

undergone a shift from teacher-centred to child-centred when the Ministry of Education

launched the pilot child-friendly school initiative (CFS) in 2005. Of the five dimensions of

CFS, the first is its inclusive aspect, which states that CFS celebrates and responds to

diversity by ensuring that each child irrespective of their differences is provided with equal

opportunities (Sherab 2014). Moreover, in 2000, the Ministry of Education set up a separate

Unit for SEN, which was upgraded to a Division in 2011. Part of the Division's work is to

3

support the 12 designated 'integrated' schools that accept children with disabilities. The

objective of the SEN division is to "break the cycle of invisibility and deprivation by bringing

every child with Special Educational Needs into the forefront of any developmental activity" (MOE

2012, 6).

While Bhutan has undergone significant policy changes and has witnessed some

initiatives designed to promote the participation in education of children with diverse needs,

at the level of practice, there are gaps that Bhutan still needs to address. UNICEF-Bhutan's

latest annual report (2015) highlights an increase in gender inequality with a bias against

boys, and a rise in dropouts from the highest grades of primary school. In specific relation to

children with disabilities, it states that 'they are often marginalised or discriminated against and are

not offered the opportunities to achieve their full potential' (18). In this paper, we present findings

from a research that explored Bhutanese teachers' understanding of inclusion and disability,

and on the basis of our findings, we argue that the preparation of teachers for inclusion in

education is one of the significant gaps that Bhutan needs to address in order to make its

education system more inclusive. In the next section, we explore the relevant literature and

why it seemed pertinent to explore Bhutanese teachers' views on inclusion and disability.

Literature Review

The Role of Teacher Preparation for Inclusion

It is well known that inclusion in education is a complex concept, and there is lack of clarity

as to what it is and how it should be implemented in practice (Farell and Ainscow 2002;

Mitchell 2005; Erten and Savage 2012; Smyth et al. 2014). According to Norwich (2008),

inclusion is about schools being able to accommodate the needs of all children. In an inclusive

school, students with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in all academic and

social activities. Historically, the shift towards inclusion primarily started as a challenge to the

4

barriers experienced by children with disabilities, who were excluded from the mainstream, and the term 'integration' was initially used to refer to the mainstream placement of those children (Hodkinson 2010). Although it is now commonly accepted that integration is not a synonym for inclusion (authors' names 2015), the terms integration and inclusion may still be used interchangeably in different contexts (Avramidis and Norwich 2002). Similarly, the thus far predominant models or conceptualisations of SEN/D offer very different possible explanations of their causes (Reindal 2008). In a nutshell, the medical model of disability perceives disability as caused by factors lying within the individual, whereas the social model perceives disability to be caused by the environment that does not meet the needs of a disabled person (Llewellyn and Hogan 2000). It follows that the complex and context-specific meaning of concepts such as inclusion and disability, may lead to many different interpretations of these concepts as well as quite different approaches to the education of children with SEN/D.

In relation to this, Mitra (2006) explains that the way concepts, such as disability, are defined and understood will have fundamental implications for framing policies and implementation. Lawson, Parker, and Sikes (2006) argue that the way individuals understand inclusive education influences significantly how policy translates into practice. Interestingly, research shows that teachers' prior knowledge and understanding of inclusion is a key factor to its successful implementation (for a review of the relevant literature, see authors' names 2015). Moreover, teachers' attitudes to and understanding of inclusion have been shown to change after specialised training or further studies (Cologon 2012; Boyle, Topping and Jindal-Shape 2013; Costello and Boyle 2013; Lawson, Norwich and Nash 2013; Cameron and Jotveit 2014). It thus seems to be the case that preparing and educating teachers for inclusion is a key factor in promoting positive attitudes and best practices.

5

Bhutanese Teachers' Preparation for Inclusion

As explained in the introduction, Bhutan has embraced the philosophy of inclusion at the policy level. However, even though schools are required to accept students with diverse learning needs, teachers are not appropriately prepared to meet those needs (R. Dorji 2015). In a review of research conducted on teacher education for inclusion in developing countries of the Asia-Pacific region during the period 2007-2012, Sharma et al. (2013) found in relation to Bhutan, 'shortage of appropriately trained teachers' and 'lack of suitable and effective professional development opportunities for teachers endeavouring to implement inclusive practices' (9). They moreover noted *'a lack of any systematic national teacher education programs'* (10). Even today, the two Colleges for teacher education in Bhutan do not offer any qualification specific to inclusive education or SEN/D. As a result, Sharma et al. (2013) stress that the country relies heavily on external experts, and express their concerns over 'the lack of participatory involvement by local stakeholders' (10) in the implementation of inclusion. Schuelka (2015) picked up the same issue in his research that we review in the following section. Dawa (2009) mentions some opportunities for teachers in Bhutan to attend short training courses, usually led by the Ministry of Education and Non Governmental Organisations.

It thus seems that formal teacher preparation for inclusive education in Bhutan is almost non-existent. As a result, most teachers in Bhutan working with students with disabilities have not had any specialised training. However, as we have already seen, the successful implementation of inclusion depends significantly on teachers' prior knowledge and understanding of inclusive education and disability, and teacher preparation has been found to improve teachers' ability to implement inclusion in practice. It thus seemed worthwhile to explore Bhutanese teachers' understanding of inclusion and disability.

6

Bhutanese Teachers' Understanding of Inclusion and Disability

In an ethnographic study on how disability is constructed by the wider Bhutanese society,

Schuelka (2015) found that in modern Bhutan, a traditional conceptualisation of disability

influenced by Buddhist beliefs seems to coexist with two other models of disability, which are

coming from outside, namely, the medical and the social models of disability. He argues that

the latter two discourses exist 'not only in tension with themselves, but also in tension with the pre-

existing socio-cultural constructions of disability' (821). He specifies that:

> 'a belief in karma allows a general mistrust of an individual with disabilities because it is
>
> believed that they had committed a sin in their previous life that has consequently led them to
>
> their current disposition' (822).

These observations suggest that although Bhutan has embraced inclusive education in

theory, in practice the situation is more complex, because traditional cultural beliefs and

external influences -that may sometimes be contradictory to each other- are likely to shape the

way inclusion and disability are understood by the Bhutanese society.

Research on Bhutanese teachers' understanding of inclusion and disability is scarce

(Gyamtsho and Maxwell 2012; R. Dorji 2015). According to Wangmo (2013), the dearth of

studies calls for research that is contextually relevant to Bhutan. This is why we were

interested to explore in some depth the understanding of inclusion and disability from the

perspective of Bhutanese teachers. Do teachers in Bhutan share a similar understanding of

inclusion? How do they perceive inclusion and disability? What views do they have regarding

the inclusion of children with disabilities? Our study aimed to generate some answers to these

questions. The following section outlines our methodology.

Methodology

Rationale and Aims

As stated before, the rationale behind this study was to shed some light on the understanding

of inclusion and disability from the perspective of Bhutanese teachers. We were directed by

the following main research question: *How is a) inclusion and b) disability understood by*

teachers in Bhutan? Accordingly, the research aims were mainly to explore and capture the

concepts as seen by teachers in Bhutan, and at a broader level to help construct the concepts

in a way that is contextually relevant to Bhutan.

Research Approach and Method

Because we had to capture and explore participants' own understanding, we chose to use the

qualitative interview method, which helps capture the perceptions of local actors (Punch

2009). We developed a semi-structured interview guide to direct the interview process and to

keep the focus on the topics pertinent to our research questions (Robson 2011). Fourteen

questions asked participants to provide their understanding of inclusion/inclusive education,

disability/SEN, and their broader views about inclusion in Bhutan. Prior to main data

collection, we conducted a pilot study to test the validity of the interview questions. This

provided feedback on the questions and the interview process, and as a result, we made minor

adjustments to the initial interview guide to maximise its clarity.

Research Setting: Participants and Procedures followed

We used a purposive sampling method in order to gather suitable participants, as is often the

case in qualitative research (Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle 2010). The goal of purposeful

sampling is to select participants that are able to provide the richest and most relevant

information that will help address the research question (Ibid 2010). Our target group were

teachers in Bhutan, and we were particularly interested in including teachers with some

8

experience in teaching children with SEN/D or with any experience in the field of Inclusion

and SEN/D. We initially sent an email to 20 teachers selected from different schools and

regions in order to make the sample as representative of all regions as possible. Out of the 20

people who were invited to take part, 15 accepted and signed the consent form. Accordingly,

15 Bhutanese teachers with and without experience of teaching children with SEN/D took

part in the research. The majority came from Western Bhutan (N=7), and the rest from

Eastern Bhutan (N=4), Southern Bhutan (N=3) and Central Bhutan (N=1). An overview of

participants' characteristics is provided in Table 1.

[INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

It is relevant to stress that out of the 15 participants, 1 worked in a special school and

3 worked in 'integrated' mainstream schools. Only these 4 teachers had received some short-

term training on SEN/D in the form of workshops. Short tailor-made training is usually

provided to teachers in special and in "integrated" schools during the winter vacations,

coordinated by the Ministry of Education and usually supported by UNICEF-Bhutan. The

remaining 11 participants did not have any specialised training on SEN/D or inclusion. Out of

the 15 interviews, 6 were conducted via Skype and 9 face to face, and each of the interviews

lasted for up to 30 minutes. Interviews were voice recorded with participants' permission, and

the audio files were deleted upon the completion of the research.

Data Analysis

In preparation for the analysis, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. To

maintain participants' anonymity and right to confidentiality, at this stage code names were

introduced in the transcripts to replace participants' real names, and all other identifiable

names were removed from the transcripts. To analyse the data, we used the thematic

9

approach, guided by the research question (Braun and Clarke 2008), which was broken down

into two sub-questions:

(1) How do teachers in Bhutan understand 'Inclusion'?

(2) How do teachers in Bhutan understand 'Disability'?

Accordingly, findings were grouped under 2 main themes:

(1) Understanding of Inclusion

(2) Understanding of Disability

During the analysis, a third theme emerged, i.e. *Challenges to and opportunities for*

Inclusion in Bhutan. In the following section we present the three main themes that emerged

from the analysis alongside illustrative quotations from the interviews.

Presentation of Findings

Theme 1: Understanding of Inclusion

From participants' responses to the question *'How do you understand 'Inclusion'?'* the

following 3 sub-themes emerged: *human right, participation of all,* and *participation of the*

disabled. Interestingly, participation of the disabled was conceptualised solely as physical

placement in regular schools. We provide a summary of theme 1 with some illustrative

quotations in Table 2.

[INSERT TABLE 2 NEAR HERE]

In summary, although participants perceived inclusion predominantly as a human

right, some differences emerged in their views about whom inclusion concerns. On the one

hand, some seemed to understand inclusion as accommodating all children and their

individual differences. Participants who shared this view mentioned that in an inclusive

classroom there should not be any form of discrimination and that there should be respect for

diversity. On the other hand, others seemed to strongly associate inclusion more specifically

with disability, and consequently as concerned only with the participation of a narrow group

of children.

Theme 2: Understanding of Disability

Overwhelmingly it emerged from the data that participants shared a view of disability as

deviance from normality. Several descriptions were given by different participants of a

disabled person as being different and inferior to other people, meaning that 'they are not able

to do things like other people' (P1). Furthermore, some participants seemed to strongly associate

the causes of disability with biological reasons, e.g. genetic factors and innate medical

conditions or accidents. Even more interestingly, some participants said that disability was

due to karma from past life (i.e. fate). We provide some quotations illustrative of these sub-

themes, in table 3.

[INSERT TABLE 3 NEAR HERE]

Theme 3: Challenges and Opportunities for Inclusion in Bhutan

In terms of challenges, participants were divided in their views about whether inclusion is

possible for Bhutan. One group held the view that inclusive education is not at all realistic or

contextually relevant to Bhutan. For example:

> 'In my opinion, in our country inclusive education is not appropriate because teachers are not
> qualified or trained in special education' (P15).

A second group saw integration, i.e. physical placement in a mainstream school, as the furthest Bhutan can go for the time being in the inclusion process. For example,

'When it comes to inclusive school or education, we can include them, but then when it comes to giving them the knowledge they need, we are not able to do that.' (P4)

Finally, a third group of participants suggested that special schools are more suitable for children with disabilities, because 'all the teachers there are trained to deal with those children.' (P3). Another participant was skeptical about inclusion depending on the type of disability, because in his view, 'the success of an inclusive classroom depends upon the challenges created by the disability in question' (P8).

Furthermore, across our sample, there was a common perception that there is currently lack of teachers trained on inclusion in Bhutan. The following quotation captures this view:

'The main challenge of making schools inclusive is the lack of capacity especially on the part of the teacher.' (P6)

Participants also expressed the view that the government should invest more in training teachers:

'We should train more teachers and basic training should start from the training institutes where teachers are educated.' (P5)

'Government should think about educating and training teachers in line with inclusive education, especially train teachers to work with children with special needs.' (P4)

12

In terms of opportunities, it is worthy of mention that some participants claimed that their perception of children with disabilities changed positively after working with them:

'To go to the class it was a night mare, coz these children will act abnormal and you will not want to go to the class, but later on when we got to know each other, when we learnt about each other, we developed the feeling of belongingness, and now I see that I am very comfortable with them.' (P3)

'Before I used to say that a disabled people they can't do this, I always underestimated the disabled people [...] but now I see lots of potential because they are so clever and we can't undermine them, if they are given the right opportunity, they are really intelligent.' (P5)

Summary of Findings

Findings revealed that teachers in Bhutan constructed disability primarily based on the medical model or view of disability, and saw it mainly as the product of factors lying within the individual, such as Karma or an inherited or acquired medical condition. All teachers in our sample described disability as deviance from the norm. Another finding however was that although teachers broadly understood inclusion as a human right, some thought it concerns all children while others thought that it only concerns those children with disabilities and in particular, their placement in regular schools. Participants also shared what they think are some of the challenges in the implementation of inclusion in the context of Bhutan, such as for example the lack of trained teachers. Interestingly, some teachers in our sample who had experience of working with children with disabilities reported an increase in positive attitude towards inclusion. These findings are discussed in the following section.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The main objective of this study was to take a snapshot of the understanding of inclusion and disability from the perspectives of the participants selected. Given the scope of our research, we were not able to interview a larger sample or to follow up with participants in order to capture somewhat richer narratives. Future research on this topic could focus on increasing the sample size and using a multiple stage interview approach. Bearing in mind that the results of this study may have some limited generalisability, because of the sample size and the approach adopted, in this section we discuss our key findings and their implications.

Our findings suggest that the teachers we interviewed had a quite mixed understanding of inclusion, and their views on inclusion and disability seemed to reflect some very different discourses. Firstly, the perception of inclusion as a human right was a consistent finding strongly emerging from almost all interviews and it is in line with previous research on how teachers understand inclusion (authors' names 2015). The recognition of education as a human right for all children can be traced back to Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that 'everyone has the right to education'. This right was reaffirmed in the historic Salamanca Statement, as follows: 'every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning' (UNESCO 1994, viii). From the Education For ALL Goals (UNSESCO 2000) through to the recent Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015), it is clear that 'the philosophy of educating children has gradually focused more on providing equal educational opportunities from a rights-based perspective' (Forlin et al. 2011, 51). Hence the global movement towards inclusion has been well embedded within a discourse of human rights and social justice (Farrell 2000; Lindsay 2003, 2007), and this was clearly reflected in how our participants understood inclusion at the broader level. Schuelka (2015) argues that the rights-based conceptualisation of disability is the same as the social model of disability (Barnes

14

2000), in that they both suggest a social justice approach and a focus on respecting diversity

and making changes to the environment rather than the individual. Schuelka moreover argues

that both the rights-based and the social models coexist in modern Bhutan, and this was

further supported by our findings.

However, when asked about the nature of inclusion in more depth, i.e. about who is

the focus of inclusion, it seems that teachers in our sample held conflicting views. On the one

hand, some perceived inclusion as concerning all children and their participation in the

regular school irrespective of their individual differences. The definition of inclusion provided

by these participants reflects broader conceptualisations of inclusion as a social justice

approach that concerns the right to education, participation, and learning of all pupils and not

only those with SEN/D (Norwich 2008). Stubbs (2008) argues that inclusive education is a

broad concept and 'represents a shift from being pre-occupied with a particular group to a focus on

overcoming barriers to learning and participation' (38). Similarly, in Bhutan's Draft National

Policy on Special Educational Needs, inclusion is described as: 'to include every child regardless

of her/his disabilities, colour, creed, culture, religion, language, regions and ethnic background for

her/his education' (MOE 2012, 19). The understanding of inclusion by this group of teachers

was therefore compatible with the broader view of inclusion as the elimination of all forms of

discrimination and with the rights based/social model approach.

On the other hand, some participants had a quite different view in relation to who is

the focus of inclusion, and primarily associated it with practices for supporting those children

with disabilities and especially their placement in regular schools. This means that they

understood inclusion as specialised provision and support for specific children rather than as a

change in the wider school culture and practices in order to include all children, and this

finding is also in line with previous research on teachers' understanding of inclusion (authors'

names 2015). Vislie (2003) and Nilholm (2006) remind us that the idea of inclusive education

for children with SEN/D was first introduced to the world by the Salamanca statement

(UNESCO 1994). This means that from early on, inclusion has been associated with those

children with SEN/D. Sikes, Lawson and Parker (2007) argue that inclusion is still often

associated with these specific groups of children, and similarly Hodkinson (2010) observes

that increasingly inclusion is conceptualised as being about the participation of children with

SEN/D in regular schools. This narrow view of inclusion as concerning only some children

and their placement seems to be closer to the understanding of inclusion as integration

(authors' names 2015). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) point out that inclusion is nowadays

often used as meaning placement in regular schools and that the terms integration and

inclusion are still used as synonymous in many contexts. Our findings seem to support this,

and it seems that in this context some teachers saw mere placement in a regular school as a

synonym for inclusion. Furthermore, in relation to placement, a few participants expressed the

view that a special school serves children with disabilities better. Those participants

maintained that special schools have better trained teachers. The view that some children

should be excluded from mainstream education strongly echoes the medical model of

disability, which is discussed next.

Kroeger (2010) explains that prior to the era of the active disability movement, which

gained momentum in the 1970s, disability was primarily seen as arising from the limitations

of an individual. Similarly the teachers in our research understood disability as caused by

within person factors. The belief in one's Karma as a reason for one's disability emerged

strongly and supports findings of previous research that has highlighted traditional Bhutanese

cultural notions about disability that can be incompatible with inclusive values (Schuelka

2012). Our participants had a shared notion that disability means deviance from normality, in that they described being disabled as being different and not being able to perform tasks like other people. Thus their understanding of disability strongly reflected the medical model of disability, and this is another significant contradiction, given that the majority expressed an understanding of inclusion from a social or human rights model perspective.

Interestingly, participants specifically and consistently mentioned lack of teacher training as an obstacle to the implementation of inclusive approaches in Bhutan, and some even argued that Bhutan is still not ready for inclusion. This is in agreement with previous research on teachers' views about inclusion in developing countries (Chireshe 2011) that points to the lack of teacher training as a factor perceived by teachers to be hindering inclusion and making it seem unrealistic to teachers in these contexts. Moreover, views echoed by our participants such as for example that the success of inclusion depends on the nature of the disability in question reflect findings of previous research in other contexts that has shown teachers to be reluctant to include certain groups of children with disabilities (Croll and Moses 2000; Avramidis and Norwich 2002). Finally, the rise in teachers' positive attitudes about inclusion after contact with children with disabilities is an encouraging finding that is also in agreement with previous research (Chireshe 2011).

As stressed earlier, teacher training has been found to be a factor contributing to the success of inclusion in practice by shaping positive teacher attitudes and by improving their knowledge. A breadth of research suggests that teacher education for inclusion supports its successful implementation (Cologon 2012; Boyle, Topping, and Jindal-Snape 2013; Cameron and Jortveit 2014). Erten and Savage (2012) highlight that there is a general lack of teacher training for inclusion worldwide and as we have seen, currently in Bhutan it is almost non-

17

existent (Sharma et al. 2013). Bhutanese scholars (Dawa 2009; R. Dorji 2015) have stressed

that lack of teacher training on inclusion is a key challenge to its implementation in practice,

and have argued that in order for inclusion to move forward in Bhutan, importance should be

placed to developing training programmes on inclusion for teachers. According to the

Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994, 26): 'appropriate preparation of all educational personnel

stands out as a key factor in promoting progress towards inclusive schools'. The voices from our

study strongly argue for the need to appropriately prepare teachers for inclusive education in

Bhutan.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To sum up, our findings suggest that teachers in Bhutan had some contradictory and

sometimes completely incompatible understandings of inclusion and disability. In other

words, our findings support 'the existence of a multiplicity of disability discourses that […] task

local actors to negotiate these discourses' (Schuelka 2015, 820). For example, their

understanding reflected both a medical and a social model/human rights discourse at the same

time. Schuelka (2012) explains that the recent big changes that Bhutan's education system has

been undergoing have been influenced by numerous factors: major UN-led human rights

initiatives have been signed by Bhutan, educational policies have been imported from India,

and at the same time, international organisations like UNICEF currently work in collaboration

with the Ministry of Education and help shape the development of the country's education

system. These organisations introduce the social justice and human rights discourses to the

country. At the same time, 'medical experts' from abroad introduce a medical model

discourse when advising local professionals in Bhutan (Schuelka 2015). Last but not least,

some Buddhist ideas such as that of disability as the result of Karma that are incompatible

with inclusive principles are still influencing the way disability is understood in Bhutan. All

those influences, external or internal to Bhutan seem to be shaping the way teachers in Bhutan

understand inclusion and disability. We would therefore argue that the way forward for

Bhutan is to focus on developing more consistent approaches to the preparation of its teachers

for inclusive education. Educating and training teachers is a crucial step in taking inclusion

forward in Bhutan. It is worthwhile to mention here that the Royal University of Bhutan in

collaboration with the Ministry of education, UNICEF, and a University in Australia is

currently developing the first post-graduate programme in special and inclusive education for

teachers (Paro College of Education 2013), and this is a step in the right direction.

As stressed earlier, research related to inclusion and disability in Bhutan is extremely

limited. We argue that the lack of research is one of the biggest challenges for academics and

practitioners in the field of inclusive education, and the findings resulting from our research

contribute to the small pool of knowledge that is locally and contextually relevant to Bhutan.

It is imperative that further research is conducted to shed more light on some of the factors

that foster and hinder inclusion in this specific context. We would imagine that future

research on this topic could also include the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as the

children with and without disabilities, their parents and policy makers.

Word count: 5152

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24

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Tables

Table 1. Overview of participant characteristics

Gender		Age			Teaching experience in years			Total
Male	Female	<25	25-45	>45	<1	1-10	>10	
7	8	2	12	1	3	9	3	15

Table 2. Summary of Theme 1

Theme 1	Sub-theme	Example quotations
Understanding of Inclusion	Human right	*'Every child is entitled to inclusive education'.* (P1) *'Inclusion is when the right of children to education is respected'* (P11)
	Participation of all	*'Inclusion...what I understand is including children with different backgrounds and different needs [...] Inclusion is including everybody irrespective of one's cast, creed, religion and ability.'* (P3)
	Participation of the disabled	*'Inclusion is taking care of children with disabilities and educating them along with other children who are not disabled'* (P15) 'Inclusion provides opportunity for students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms' (P8).

Table 3. Summary of Theme 2

Theme 2: Understanding of Disability	Sub-theme: Deviance from normality	*'Disabled children are not able to do things like other people or other children'.* (P1) *'Someone who cannot walk properly, someone who cannot speak properly, someone who cannot hear properly'.* (P2) *'Refers to physically or mentally challenged persons with defects of organs...'* (P10) '*I would define disabled the person who cannot perform his or her duties like other normal persons. [...] For me, disability is anything which a person can't and what the non disabled can do'* (P13)

	Sub-theme: Biologically caused	*The main cause of disability in terms of physical disability could be biological and medical, diet and genes'.* (P3) *'When the mother is careless and she abuses unhealthy things when the child is in the womb and after birth when the child is not provided proper diet'.* (P7) *'Disability is caused by improper diet, genes and accidents'.* (P13)
	Sub-theme: Past Life Karma	*'For me the main cause of disability is because of past life; God has punished the person for sin and wrong doing in the past. […] Past life karma…I think disability happens because of someone's fate from their past life.'* (P15)