Voicing the Unheard: An Examination of the School Experiences of Nepali Dalit Students

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Program in International Comparative Studies
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To my mother, Bhakta Kumari Rajak
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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of and relationship among several factors that shape the school experiences of Nepali Dalit students. In Nepal, caste is at the center of people’s conversations about themselves and their experiences at school. Regrettably, Dalit students’ position at the bottom of the caste hierarchy continues to frame their educational experience. While there is an emerging literature on this issue, only a handful of studies consider the school experiences of Dalits from their own perspectives, and the research tends to have a narrow geographical focus. As a result, the scholarly work fails to adequately emphasize and analyze the heterogeneity of Dalit students’ school experiences. This thesis addresses these gaps in the existing research in order to articulate a more nuanced understanding of Dalit students’ school experiences.

During the summer of 2014, I conducted interviews with 61 Dalit children from various geographical regions (Sindhupalchok in Mountain region, Lalitpur in Hilly region, and Nawalparasi in Terai region) and with different levels of socio-economic status. Informed by current educational theory and recent studies focused on Nepal, my analysis of the interview transcripts identified three social context factors (Family Educational Background, Economic Status, and Neighborhood Effects) and five school-related factors (Caste of Teachers, Teachers’ Expectations, School Curriculum, Dalit Scholarship Programs, and Relationship with Peers) that all significantly affect Dalit students’ school experiences. Moreover, I discovered that these factors do not operate in isolation but rather, they interact in powerful ways to shape and influence the school experiences of Dalit students. While further studies on an even larger scale is necessary in order to better understand and enhance the quality of Dalit education, my research shows decisively that any policy designed to improve Dalit education must, in order to be effective, form part of a broader initiative to identify and address the ways in which multiple factors come together to shape their school experiences.
Introduction

In the summer of 2011, I worked as a volunteer teacher in a village school right outside Pokhara, Nepal. During my time at the school, I observed that, in most classes, Dalit\(^1\) students were not doing very well compared to their higher caste classmates. Some of them were performing below their grade levels and were absent from school more often. Through conversations with a few students and teachers, I learned that many Dalit students drop out of school before completing their secondary level (10\(^{th}\) grade) education. Statistics confirm their stories: at 33%, the literacy rate among Dalit students is half the national average; only 4% of Dalits pass the secondary level compared to 25% of Brahmans and Chhetris (two higher caste groups); and while 5% of Brahmans and Chhetris go on to attend higher education, the same is true for less than 0.5% of the Dalit population nationwide.\(^2\)

These facts about the status and performance of Dalit students in the Nepali school system troubled me deeply as they resonated with many of my own experiences. Growing up as a member of a poor Dalit family in an urban area of Sanothimi, Bhaktapur — the very center of education in Nepal — I was discriminated against by some of my neighbors because of my low caste status.\(^3\) They used to call me *Dhobi ki chori*, “daughter of a washerman,” and I would cry because my friends would refuse to eat or play with me. For

\(^1\) Dalits are the lowest caste in the Hindu caste system. The word ‘Dalit’ is a Hindi term and was originally derived from the Sanskrit word *Dalita*, meaning oppressed. The term also has close etymological links with Nepali words *Dalai* or *Dalnu*, which means to exploit, crush or suppress.


\(^3\) The Department of Education, the Office of the Controller of Examination, and the Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB) are all based in Sanothimi.
me, however, receiving a full scholarship at the SOS Hermann Gmeiner School, one of the best schools in the area, helped me imagine a different life. At school, I was exposed to an array of opportunities and was fortunate to have teachers who believed in me, encouraged me, and supported me in every possible way. The immense support and positive learning environment at this school not only made it possible for me to pass my 10th grade national exam with distinction, but it also landed me a full scholarship to pursue a higher education in England and the United States. I have been very fortunate; many Dalit students face extreme difficulties on their educational journey. With this research project, I hope to provide a comprehensive picture of the more common, and challenging school experiences of Dalit children.

Understanding my educational path has been a gradual process of asking how I ended up where I am today. Despite growing up in extreme poverty and with a single parent, I was somehow able to make it through. Was it because I grew up with siblings who, through their example, motivated me to do well in school? Was it because I lived in an urban area? Was it because I happened to have unusually supportive teachers with high expectations? Or, perhaps, did my access to role models both in the community and at school make the difference? What about other Dalits? Why are they unable to stay in school? Haunted by these questions, I set out on a journey to find out more about the factors that shape the school experiences of Dalit students in Nepal.

Review of Literature

Turning to the scholarly community was the first step of my journey in understanding the school experiences of Dalit students in Nepal. Although limited in
number, the existing literature helped me identify the major issues Dalit children face in their education and was, for that reason, pivotal in shaping my own research. This literature can be organized into three broad categories – i) Studies focused on caste discrimination, ii) Studies focused on the impact of caste on Dalit education, and iii) Studies focused on the school perceptions and experiences of Dalits.

Under the first category falls the 2009 report created by Krishna Bhattachan, Tej B. Sunar, and Yasso K. Bhattachan as a part of Indian Institute of Dalit’s working series on the caste situation in South Asia. Through constitutional, political, and cultural matrix, the report provided an in-depth discussion on the nature of caste-based discrimination and untouchability of Dalits. Regarding Dalit education, more specifically, the report highlighted poor social relationships, exclusive school curricula, and poor implementation of scholarship programs as the major causes of school disengagement of Dalits. While the study was primarily focused on the issue of caste-based discrimination, it also drew attention to the heterogeneity or diverse nature — regional, economic, linguistic, and cultural — of the Dalit population.

The studies under the second category have found a significant influence of caste on Dalit education. An example is the 1996 study by Bidhya N. Koirala, in the Bungkot Dalit community of Gorkha district. Gathering data from various community members, including Dalit students, their families, and teachers, Koirala explored how the caste

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culture shapes the relationships between Dalits and their schools. His study revealed that caste was central to the way people talked about themselves and their experiences at school. He also found that the education they received didn’t reproduce the old caste culture but, rather, enabled Dalits to understand their situation, to question their status, and to know the world outside their village. In this regard, schooling was found to have positive effects on Dalit students. However, Koirala noted that the current education system is not effective pedagogically for the Dalits and does, in fact, very little to help them learn. While Dalit parents were anxious to send their children to school to help them succeed in life, the parents were generally dissatisfied with the poor treatment of their children.

Another influential 2007 study by Eimar Barr et al. examined how the educational opportunities of Dalit children in India and Nepal are affected by their caste status. This study set out policy options for overcoming impediments specific to Dalit education. The section on Nepal critically examined the government’s commitment to the Education for All reform program in the 1990s, and the policies that followed. The study concluded that the development policies for the Dalits in Nepal have remained merely welfare-oriented without addressing the structural problems such as the educational level of parents, low representation of Dalit teachers in schools, and lack of role models.

Studies under the third category have delved into the perceptions and experiences of Dalits. One such study by Meg Infiorati focused on barriers to education as perceived by

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Dalit dropouts. Analysis of the data resulted in identification of a central theme: failure being an option in the life of Dalits. Sub-themes included a lack of knowledge about educational opportunities and a general inability to imagine a personal future. The findings of the study are significant as they demonstrate a need for paying greater attention to the Dalit culture in relation to education, in addition to the more commonly recognized issues of poverty and caste discrimination. However, since Infiorati’s study was limited to a small Dalit population, it didn’t take into account the geographical and urban/rural diversity within Dalits. Thus, Infiorati’s findings may apply more to the Dalits from villages in the Hill area. Furthermore, Infiorati’s findings contradict Koirala’s suggestion that parents don’t accept poor schooling.

Utilizing a different research method, Margarita Pivovarova’s 2011 study focused on the determinants of school participation in rural Nepal. Pivovarova decided to use the data from two of the Nepalese Living Standard Surveys (NLSS), one from 1996 and the other from 2004. Controlling for family background characteristics and village development indicators, her research focused on girls from lower-caste households. The analysis of the data revealed that the prevalence of the higher caste households in the community, along with the overall village development and infrastructure, plays an important role in improving school participation and progression among this most marginalized and vulnerable group of children. Although Pivovarova focuses only on

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7 Meg Infiorati, “Nepal Dalits’ Perceptions of Barriers to Education” (PhD diss., Walden University, January 2010), accessed March 14, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
8 Data was collected from a sample of 24 male and female participants from five Dalit villages outside the Kathmandu valley, ages 16 to 24.
9 This disagreement could be the result of doing research on different Dalit communities.
lower-caste girls, the finding of the study is significant as it highlights a positive relationship between mixed communities and school performance of Dalit children.

In 2013, Suraj Budhathoki examined Terai11 Dalit children’s experiences and perspectives on issues related to school participation.12 This is one of the few studies that observed the experiences of the Dalit children from their own perspectives. Although the researcher interviewed parents to explore the family context, data was primarily collected from 23 children in the Sunsari district. The study revealed a lack of awareness of the importance of education as the main problem: the subjects of the study were unable to predict the results of an education because of economic instability, as well as social and cultural practices in society. Budhathoki further noted that the disappointing outcome from the lower quality of education provided for Dalit children is also one of the main reasons for their low participation rates. By pointing to the growing gap between public and private schools, Budhathoki explained the discouragement among Dalit children, as majority of them attend public schools. This study is significant because it redirects the focus from a lack of awareness and school-based discrimination to the need for new interventions to help provide equal access to quality education for Dalit children. In an earlier study, Infiorati noted that acceptance of failure is one of the key reasons why Dalit children drop out of school. But Budhathoki’s study suggests that, in fact, the most significant factor is their refusal to accept the low-quality education provided by the state.

In reviewing the existing scholarship on school experiences of Dalit students, I

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11 Terai is one of the three geographical regions in Nepal (see Figure 0.1).
identified several gaps in the existing literature that needed to be addressed. First of all, only a handful of investigations observe the school experiences of Dalit students qualitatively, that is, from their own perspectives. Secondly, most studies were based on research conducted in a narrow geographical context, thus leading to scattered and contradictory findings. Finally, and most importantly, this narrow focus in the scholarly work has meant that the heterogeneity of Dalit students’ school experiences has not been adequately emphasized and analyzed. As a result, the impact of housing patterns, geographical, and socio-economic diversity among Dalits in creating different school experiences have not been explored in sufficient detail. Hence, the existing research fails to capture the complex ways in which various factors interact with each other in shaping Dalit students’ overall school experiences.

My thesis, thus, is an attempt to address the gaps in the existing research in order to articulate a more nuanced understanding of Dalit students’ school experiences. By diversifying the research to include Dalit students from different socio-economic status as well as geographical regions, I have attempted to bring out the heterogeneity of factors that impact Dalit students’ school experiences. Moreover, by focusing solely on Dalit students as the subject of my research, I have sought to provide them with a platform to put forward their own voices regarding their school experiences. Since Dalit students are the ones who are directly experiencing the school environment, it is necessary to listen to and learn from their perspectives.

Methodology

As the purpose of this study is to identify and examine the ways in which different
Factors interact with each other to shape Dalit students’ school experiences in Nepal, I adopted a qualitative research method – a method in which researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” To this end, my primary source material consists of interviews with 61 Nepali Dalit students that I conducted over the course of 8 weeks in the summer of 2014. Following the appropriate guidelines and protocols set by the Duke University Institutional Review Board, I received oral consent from the students, their parents, and their school principals to conduct the interviews. All interviews were performed in Nepali and each session ran for about 30 to 45 minutes. The questions were related to their family background, future goals, role models, their social relationships with teachers and peers in school, and their thoughts on certain educational reforms. I asked each student the same set of basic questions and, depending on their backgrounds, I sometimes made specific inquiries as well (see Appendix for interview protocol). In terms of protecting the identity and personal information of the interviewed students, I assigned a generic name to each student. The letter ‘R’ was assigned to students from rural areas, and letter ‘U’ was assigned to those from urban areas.

The age of the interviewed Dalit students ranged from 10 to 16 years and the grade levels ranged from 5 to 10. Of the 61 students, 32 were males and 29 were females. The schools these students attended were located in three different geographical regions: Sindhupalchok district in the Mountain region, Lalitpur district in the Hilly region, and Nawalparasi in the Terai region (see Figure 0.1).

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Prior to the selection of the three districts included in my research, I consulted my thesis advisor, David Malone, professor at Duke University and Shisir Khanal, the CEO of Teach for Nepal for their suggestions on appropriate sites for my study. We all agreed that the best way to capture the heterogeneity of Dalit students' school experiences would be to gather data from one district from each of the three geographical regions. Sindhupalchok and Lalitpur were particularly chosen for the Mountain and Hilly regions respectively because Teach for Nepal already had connections in those districts. Nawalparasi was picked for Terai region, because I knew my friend’s family who were willing to support me during my research. On-the-ground connections were important to me, especially because I was traveling as alone as a young woman to unfamiliar places. This played a role in determining methodological aspects of my research. On the other hand, these restrictions were minimized by the fact that the Dalit population is spread across the three districts.

From each district, two public (government) schools, one urban and one rural, were
chosen for the purpose of my research. Public schools were deliberately chosen as most students in Nepal attend public schools. This is especially true for disadvantaged students such as the Dalits.

### Table 0.1 District-wise Distribution of the Number of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Number of Dalit Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sindhupalchok (Mountain Region)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalitpur (Hilly Region)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawalparasi (Terai Region)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Created by author using research data.*

In order to build a framework for interpreting my primary data, I draw upon the work of scholars and apply relevant theories and concepts from the field of education. I also use government documents, excerpts from textbooks, and relevant data from various agencies such as Nepal’s Department of Education, the United Nations and the World Bank to strengthen my argument. Through a dialogue between primary and secondary sources, I aim to portray a nuanced picture of the school experiences of Dalit students in Nepal.

**Personal Reflections on the Research: From the Plains to the Mountains**

The most enjoyable but also the most frightening part of the research process was the travel to each of the three districts. As it was the monsoon season in Nepal, I decided to first travel to the farthest district, Nawalparasi, so that I wouldn’t have to deal with heavy traffic and landslides. After a six-hour bus ride along the roads that wind down from the
hills of Kathmandu, I finally reached the plains of Terai. I breathed a sigh of relief because my heart had been racing through most of the trip. Within 10 minutes of starting our ride, we almost had an accident. I couldn’t blame the driver though: the roads in Nepal are so narrow that it’s hard to avoid accidents.

After spending about two weeks with wonderful students, a host family, and the heat and mosquitoes in Nawalparasi, I took the same trip back to Kathmandu. I was glad the return trip went much smoother.

Following this trip, I traveled to Sindhupalchok for another two weeks. After a five-hour bus ride along the roads winding up the mountains, I reached the beautiful town of Sindhupalchok. This ride was much more difficult because the bus was really crowded and I had to stand for the whole five hours. At one point during the drive, I also thought that our bus was going to fall off the road and down into the river below. Luckily, nothing terrible happened and I arrived safely at my destination.
Travel to the third district, Lalitpur, wasn’t quite as difficult since it is not far from Kathmandu. The only problem I faced was that our vehicle got stuck on a muddy road so that we had to take another bus and walk some distance.

The purpose of these travel anecdotes is not to dwell on the difficulties I myself encountered but, rather, to offer a glimpse of the everyday challenges and frustrations experienced by all Nepali people. This was the first time I traveled extensively in Nepal and it gave me an opportunity not only to understand the lives of Dalits, but that of other castes as well. For me, the most gratifying aspect of the research process was realizing what 45 minutes meant for the students I interviewed: “There are very few people who are really keen in hearing our voices and understanding our lives. I am so happy that you came.”

Thanks to the Karsh Scholarship Program, which made this amazing research experience possible for me.
Thesis Overview

The thesis is organized into three chapters. In Chapter One, I provide a general overview of Nepal’s caste system – how it started and how it has unfolded over the years in various parts of the country. In the next section of Chapter One, I discuss Nepal’s aspirations towards development depicted through the reforms of its traditional structures, and commitment to human rights. I end Chapter One with an account of the educational status of Dalits in Nepal and examine how it has changed with the reforms in the country. Chapter Two and Chapter Three present an analysis of my research in three districts in Nepal. Relevant educational theories provide a theoretical framework for both chapters. Chapter Two explores the lived experiences of Dalits that shape their school experiences by providing an analysis of three factors: i) Family Educational Background, ii) Economic Status, and iii) Neighborhood Effects. Chapter Three then turns to the factors at school that are powerful determinants of Dalit students’ educational experiences. These include – i) Caste of Teachers, ii) Teachers’ Expectations, iii) School Curriculum, iv) Dalit Scholarship Program, and v) Relationship with Peers. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the important themes, building upon the relevant educational theories, as well as recommendations for further research.
Chapter One – Caste and Education in Nepal: An Overview

An understanding of the school experiences of Dalits, a marginalized group in Nepal, requires a deeper grasp of the caste system, and its role in shaping the trajectory of Dalit education in the country. Keeping this in mind, the chapter is thus organized into three main sections. The first section provides a general overview of the caste system in Nepal – how it started and how it has unfolded over the years. This is followed by a discussion on Nepal’s aspirations towards development manifested through the reform of its traditional structures, and commitment to human rights. Finally I provide an account of the educational status of Dalits and how it has changed with the reforms in the country.

**Mapping the Caste System**

The English word “caste” derives from a Spanish and Portuguese term that originally meant “race, lineage, or breed.”\(^{14}\) When the Portuguese arrived in India in the late 15th century, they used it to describe the endogamous social groups they encountered.\(^{15}\) Known as jātis in the classical Hindu system, these social groups also belonged to one of the four broader classes, or varnas: Brahmans (priest), Chhetris (warriors), Vaishyas (business people and traders), and Shudras (people performing menial tasks such as washerman). This “pigeonholing” of the members of the society into a particular varna was hierarchical in nature, Brahmans at the top, and Shudras at the


Dalits, who are the focus of this research, belong to a caste group of the further stratified Shudra varna (Figure 1.1).

![Figure 1.1. The Caste Chart Source: Created by author.](image)

\textit{Puru-Sukta}, a section that is part of the Hindu religious book \textit{Rig-veda}, provides an explanation for such a hierarchy: Brahmins were born from the mouth of the God, Chhetris were born from the arms of the God, Vaishyas were born from the thighs, and Shudras were born from the feet. The \textit{Rig-vedic} society did allow upward mobility for Shudras if they followed the way of life of the other \textit{varnas}. However, during the post-\textit{vedic} period, the caste system became rigid, especially because of the development of a “Hindu” code of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} The term 'Dalit' wasn't used in the original \textit{varna} system. The present usage of the term Dalit goes back to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, when an Indian social reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1826-1890) used it to describe the untouchables as oppressed and broken in India.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Kanhaiyālāla Sarmā, \textit{Essays on Social Stratification} (Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 1980).
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
conduct, *Manusmriti* (Law of Manu). This text was essentially responsible for establishing the hereditary membership of a person to a particular caste, which is still the norm in the present context.

In Nepal, the caste system can be traced back to the reign of King Jayasthiti Malla in the 14th century. At the time, Nepal was divided into petty states, each with its own King. As the ruler of Kathmandu valley, Jayasthiti adopted the Hinduism-based caste hierarchy and divided his kingdom into 64 different castes and sub-castes based on their occupation. For example, higher castes were responsible for priestly functions, or held administrative positions. The lower castes were assigned menial tasks such as cleaning toilets, and washing clothes. Over the centuries that followed, the caste hierarchy created by Jayasthiti continued, resulting in the social exclusion of the lower castes.

The founder of modern Nepal, King Prithivi Narayan Shah, who unified Nepal territorially in the 18th century, described the country as “a garden of four castes and 36 varnas.” With his vision of making Nepal a “pure land of Hindus” (Asil Hindustan), he initiated a process of strengthening the caste system. In other words, being a believer of the caste system and a strong follower of Hinduism, his policies for the new nation favored the higher castes, and were exclusionary towards the lower castes.

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
In 1846, Jung Bahadur Rana succeeded the Shah dynasty and began the 104-year long Rana rule. The Rana rulers were no better for the lower castes. The National Code (“Muluki Ain”), promulgated in 1854, not only affirmed the existing hierarchy between different castes, but it also introduced new laws restricting both inter-and intra-caste interactions in areas such as food, sexual relationships, marriage, and other social customs.

Under the new National Code, Dalits were referred to as “untouchables” (“pani nachalne jaat”) and were strictly prohibited from maintaining any contact with persons belonging to the higher castes. This meant that Dalits could not, for example, have any type of sexual relationships with them, enter their houses, or even touch their food. Furthermore, higher Dalit castes were required to refrain contacts from lower Dalit castes. The punishments for breaking the National Code were put in place for both the higher castes, and for Dalits, although the severity level differed. For example, if a higher caste man cohabited with a Dalit woman, then the man would be deprived of his caste status and reduced to status of a lower caste. However, a Dalit man could have faced a death sentence for cohabiting with a higher caste woman. Similar laws were put in place for interactions among higher Dalit castes, and lower Dalit castes. Ultimately, these new regulations led to the segregated Dalit settlements that are still prevalent today in many parts of the country, especially in rural areas. As we will notice in Chapter Two, this segregated settlement has a strong influence on the school experiences of Dalit students.

28 Ibid.
30 BK, The Stigma of the Name, 8.
32 Ibid.
The National Code was finally amended in 1963. However, while this amendment attempted to abolish caste discrimination by guaranteeing equal constitutional status, it failed to do so in practice.33 This is because the new code affirmed Nepal as a Hindu state, and people were guaranteed the rights to practice their religion.34 As a result, the caste-based hierarchy, backed by religious arguments, remained largely unchanged. What’s interesting is that, for Dalits who weren’t necessarily involved in their traditional jobs (marker for caste belonging), their status as Dalits still remained noticeably intact.35 This is because a person’s surname (last name) was a key distinguisher of the caste status, and was documented at one’s birth certificate, national identification card, and passport. This is still the case in present context.

Thus, validated by the laws and social practices, the low caste identity has forced many generations of Dalits to spend their lives under vicious social and economic suppression. The two higher castes, Brahmans and Chhetris, have remained in positions of power since the dawn of the caste system, supported by a social value system that consequently allowed them to divert the available opportunities and resources in favor of their own communities.36 Between 1960 and 1990, only 5 Dalits were appointed as members of the Parliament.37 Such marginalized position of Dalits, as the discussion on Chapter Two and Chapter Three will show, have a significant impact on the school experiences of Dalit students.

34 Ibid., 63.
Aspirations Towards a Just Society

Following the People’s Movement-I, democracy was reestablished in 1990 along with a new constitution. Article 11 of this constitution promised equal rights for all social groups and stated that “no discrimination shall be made against any citizen in the application of general laws on grounds of religion, race, sex, caste, tribe or ideological conviction.” The sub-article 4 directly focused on the Dalits and it ensured that “No person shall on the basis of caste be discriminated against as untouchable, be denied access to any public place, or be deprived of the use of public utilities. Any contravention of this provision shall be punishable by law.”

Despite these positive legal efforts, very little changed at the practical level: cases of prejudice and discrimination against Dalits are still prevalent. However, the restoration of democracy did allow Dalit communities to raise their voices and open debates about inequality and injustice became more common.

Dalit participation in the Movement brought light to their marginalization and disempowerment, and became one of the bases for the 1996 civil war led by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist). The demand of the party included the end of the feudal system and the creation of equality and access for all. The civil war continued for 10 years and culminated in the Comprehensive Peace Accord of November 2006, which formally

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38 The Movement was against the absolute monarchy, and the partyless system in the country. Led by various political leaders, the Movement was crucial in restoring the multiparty democratic system, though monarchy still remained.


40 Ibid.

41 IIDS, A Study on Nepal, 42-43.


ended the monarchy in Nepal. A new Interim Constitution was promulgated in January 2007. For the first time in the history of Nepal, the government made provisions for proportional representation of all groups in every aspect of state and governance.

The State shall pursue a policy which will help to uplift the economically and socially “backward” ethnic groups [Adivasi Janajati], Madhesis, Dalits, as well as marginalized communities, and workers and farmers living below the poverty line by making provisions for reservations in education, health, housing, food security and employment for a certain period of time.45

In accordance with the new constitution, an Interim Legislature-Parliament was formed in 2007 that included 18 Dalits (out of 330 members), 6 of whom were women. This was a historic moment for the Dalits of Nepal, especially since it was the first time in the country’s history that a Dalit woman became a member of the parliament.46 Further progressive legislation was passed a few years later. The Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act of 2011 made committing, encouraging to commit, or aiding caste-based discrimination a criminal act.47

Nepal’s commitment to ending all forms of discrimination also led the country to sign a number of international laws relating to human rights, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, International Covenant on the Civil and Political Rights, and Convention on the Rights of the Child.48 As a result of these efforts, some positive changes in relation to the caste system have been observed in recent years.

47 The punishment includes imprisonment up to three years or a fine up to 25 thousand rupees or both.
According to a 2003 Department for International Development (DfID) report, for example, “The practice of untouchability appears to have decreased in public places across the assessment districts - Rolpa, Rukum, Dang, Sindhupalchowk, and Ramechhap.”49

Unfortunately, despite positive policy efforts and improvements, Nepal has not been able to reach expectations when it comes to the protection, promotion and implementation of Dalits’ human rights. The caste system is still deeply rooted in society and has both direct and indirect effects on the lives of Dalits. The 2011 case of a soot-smearing of a Dalit principal who had requested that Dalits may participate in an organized public feast, provides an example of the caste-based attitudes and abuses that are still prevalent today (Figure 1.2).

What strikes me as particularly revealing about this incident is that even as a school principal, a very respected position in Nepal, the Dalit man suffered this kind of abuse. In the eyes of at least some community members, his caste identity overshadowed his occupational status, allowing some community members to turn against him. If this can happen to a Dalit principal, what is the school experience like for Dalit children? This question provides an important segue to the next section, which will explore the specific challenges and forms of discrimination within the education system of Nepal.

**Educational Status of Dalits**

History of formal education in Nepal dates back to 1854 when Jung Bahadur Rana established the first school – Durbar High School. The school was only for members of the ruling families and courtiers and hence was to remain inside the durbars (palaces) of Ranas. This restriction meant that over the 104-year Rana rule in the country, people from all castes had limited access to education. However, Dalits in particular were highly marginalized during that time. Education experts estimated that less than 100 Dalits were fortunate enough to be literate before the year 1950.

When Rana’s rule came to an end in the 1950s, the process of constructing schools began to emerge rapidly. In areas where a school was accessible, many Dalits started going

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to school and the teachers were tolerant towards Dalits students. This sudden, positive development quickly lost momentum, however, and between 1950 and 1990 no special efforts were made to improve the education of Dalits. Also, it is difficult to get quantitative figures about Dalits’ school enrollment and dropout rate, as the government did not provide caste-disaggregated data during that period. The population census of 1991 is the first population census in the history of Nepal that collected data on population and ethnicity.

Finally, after the restoration of democracy in 1990, the process of improving the education system picked up the pace again. Having realized how minority students faced unique challenges in the areas of access, enrollment, and retention, the Ministry of Education launched several education reform programs in the 1990s. Working with governmental, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies, these programs sought to recruit and retain more minority students and make the school environment more inclusive. One initiative, started in 1996, focused on providing scholarships to students from underrepresented groups. Since the majority of the minority groups, especially the Dalits, lived below the poverty line, provision of

52 Ibid., 45.
53 IIDS, A Study on Nepal, 119.
Note: The only policy that the government initiated was tuition waiver in college education. However, the major problem with this reform was that hardly any Dalits passed primary school. So, the reforms were needed at the school level not at the college level.
58 Widely known as reservation (or quotas) in Nepal, the scholarship program is similar in some ways to the ‘affirmative action’ policy in the US.
scholarships seemed to be the most rational plan for the government. Here is the list of the scholarships that were a part of this intervention:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1. List of Scholarship for Dalits and Other Minority Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Booster Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dalit Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lower Secondary and Secondary Full Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Freeship Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Scholarship for &quot;Oppressed&quot; and Dalits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: CERSOD, A Study on Scholarship Management, 26-27.*

If we look carefully at the criteria for the scholarships, it becomes clear that] the economic status and academic performance of the recipients do not seem to matter. The

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⁶⁰ NRs. 99 = $1 (on 04/09/2015). School supplies such as notebooks, pencils, erasers can be bought with $1. Simple notebooks cost around Rs. 20. So, $1 can be used to buy around 5 such notebooks. However, supplies such as the school uniform, and shoes cannot be bought with $1. You would need a minimum of $10 to buy a full school uniform. Depending on the age group, $10 could buy both the school uniform and a pair of shoes.
main requirement is low caste status and certain grade levels. There are also overlaps between different scholarships (e.g. third, forth, and fifth scholarships) that could possibly create confusions in terms of distribution. Furthermore, the scholarship amount is not really adequate to cover year-round expenses although, depending on the scholarship, it could cover stationary expenses, school uniforms, and even tuition fees. The effects of these programs on the school experiences of Dalit students is significant and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

As the government had envisioned, the scholarships helped promote the education of Dalits by minimizing the cost. The literacy rate of Dalit was 17% in the census of 1991 and jumped to over 33% by 2001.\textsuperscript{61} In the primary levels, the enrollment rate of Dalit students in the year 2005 was 12.8% higher than in 2004.\textsuperscript{62} Despite these major achievements in enrollment, however, approximately 50% of school-age Dalit children are still out of school.\textsuperscript{63}

There are huge disparities within the Dalit population as well. Between the two Dalit groups,\textsuperscript{64} Hill Dalits seem to have a higher access to education than Terai Dalits. The literacy rate of Terai Dalits is only 21.1% as opposed to 41.9% for Hill Dalits.\textsuperscript{65} Education among Terai Dalits such as Mushahar, Doms and Halkhors is almost none.\textsuperscript{66} These differences in the educational attainment level among Dalit groups, as we will see in Chapter Two, powerfully shape the school experiences of Dalit students.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{64} Based on the geographical origin, National Dalit Commission (NDC) has classified the 22 Dalit groups in Nepal into two categories - Hills Dalits and Terai Dalits. The 22 Dalit groups are not necessarily confined to their origin, and are found in different parts of Nepal.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
Education experts have criticized special programs like scholarships stating that they are designed at the central level without adequate interaction with the Dalit communities and that, as a result, these programs fail to address the needs of the targeted population.\textsuperscript{67} Solely focusing on poverty does not adequately address the magnitude, and complexity of educational marginalization among Dalits.\textsuperscript{68} Overlooked factors such as family educational background, neighborhood housing patterns, forms of pedagogical discrimination against Dalits, low representation of Dalit teachers, and the social relationships of Dalits need to be considered when designing educational programs and policies. By focusing on these pertinent issues, the following two chapters aim to provide a more nuanced account of the school experiences of Dalit students.

\textsuperscript{68} IIDS, A Study on Nepal, 121.
Chapter Two – Influence of the Home Environment

Hailed as one of the most significant research studies in the field of education, the 1966 report “Equality of Educational Opportunity,” commonly known as the “Coleman Report,” found that student background including socio-economic status is more important in determining educational outcomes than school resources: “the schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context.” Following this report, various studies have consistently found that students’ background and the context they live in have a powerful influence on students’ educational attainment. Some of the factors that these previous studies have addressed include family educational attainment, economic status, family structure, number of siblings, and quality of neighborhood.

Drawing upon these research studies, this chapter aims to examine the lived experiences of Dalit students through the lens of three background and social context factors that, according to my research, tend to be the most powerful determinants of Dalits’ school experience. These factors include – i) Family Educational Background, ii) Economic Status, and iii) Neighborhood Effects. Through a close examination of each of these factors and the complex ways in which they interact, then, I hope to construct a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by Dalit students.

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understanding of the conditions under which the Dalit students live, and how those conditions affect their perceptions of schools and academic performance. An understanding of the lived experiences is important, as it helps educators and policymakers to improve student support programs.

**Family Educational Background**

In line with the findings of previous studies on Dalits in Nepal, examination of the data from my research revealed low level of educational attainment among the parents of the interviewed Dalit students. The majority of the parents attended only primary school (see Figure 2.1). Overall, 32% of the urban parents had some level of formal education; 68% had none. Of the rural parents, 25% had some level of formal education and 75% had none. Given the available educational facilities and high literacy rates in urban areas, it was surprising to see small differences between the educational attainment of rural and urban parents.

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Similarly, as Table 2.1 suggests, little difference was noticed between the educational levels of parents of Dalit students in the three geographical regions. While parents in Nawalparasi seem to be better educated, the data for Lalitpur and Sindhupalchok are more similar. One reason that explains low level of educational attainment of all parents is that, the government developed a strategic plan to address the enrollment and retention of Dalits only during the 1990s. Given the age distribution of these parents, most of them were already out of school by then.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>% of Parents with Primary Education (Grades 1 – 5)</th>
<th>% of Parents with Secondary Education (Grades 6 – 10)</th>
<th>% of Parents with Higher Education (above grade 10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sindhupalchok</td>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalitpur</td>
<td>Hills</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawalparasi</td>
<td>Terai</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>0.96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Created by author using research data.

The low educational attainment of parents of Dalit students across the three districts is distressing since previous research has shown that high level of parental education is related to students’ positive achievement in school. For example, in one study, Pamela Davis-Kean, Associate Research Professor of Psychology at University of Michigan, examined how parents’ education and income relate to children’s academic

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achievement. Using a sample of 868 8-12-year-old non-Hispanic European American and African American students, Davis-Kean tested her hypothesis that, the parents’ education and income would link to the academic achievement of their children through parents’ educational expectations, reading, play, and affective behaviors. Consistent with her hypothesis, for both groups, Davis-Kean found that, parents’ years of schooling influenced how they structured their home environment as well as how they interacted with their children in promoting academic achievement. Acting as “coteachers,” educated parents tended to provide a more cognitively stimulating and emotionally supportive environment at home. This further helped in minimize the negative effects of financial restrictions on the education of the children.

So, what does the low parental educational attainment mean for Dalit students? Consistent with the findings of Davis-Kean, in lack of direct school experience, the parents of Dalit students are unable to fully participate in their children’s educational journey. The interviewed Dalit students, whose parents had no education or had very little education, told me that their parents never sit down with them, and ask what they learnt at school or whether they finished their homework. In addition, it appears that lack of school experience affects parents’ educational expectations for their children. Upon asking how his parents reacted when he failed his math exam in grade 9, participant AkashR said, “They didn’t scold me or anything. They said that it was ok because I passed other subjects. They can’t help me because they never went to school so they just told me that I could try

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74 Ibid., 302.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
to do better next time.” If AkashR’s parents were educated, their conversation would probably have taken a different direction. Maybe they would have tried to find out why he failed, and then offered some suggestions on how he could improve on his next exam such as consulting peers and teachers. If their economic situation allowed, maybe they would have tried to find him a math tutor. But in lack of experience in dealing with school, his parents couldn’t provide him the needed resources.

On the other hand, similar to Davis-Kean’s findings, educated parents bestow higher aspirations on their children and motivate them to attend school. The case of RajanR provides an example. The father of RajanR has a high school degree—a huge achievement for a Dalit person of his generation. After teaching for few years, he was hired to be a principal of a local primary school. When asked how his father’s education has affected his perception of school, RajanR said, “My father told me that he was able to climb up the social ladder because of his education. People salute him instead of humiliating him. Thus, I believe that it’s very important for us to go to school because education helps us to change our destiny.”

Parents are not the only family influence on Dalit students’ attitudes toward education. RajanR also has a cousin who completed a Bachelors degree in Physics and is a Science teacher at his school. In fact, his cousin is the only Dalit teacher in the entire school. During the interview, I found out that his cousin is actually moving to the US on a Diversity Visa and is hoping to continue his studies.77 RajanR said that his cousin is a great source of encouragement for him. He added, “If he could get a degree in Physics and get an opportunity to go to the US despite being a Dalit, I can definitely get my Engineering

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77 The Diversity Immigrant Visa program is a US congressionally mandated lottery program for receiving a United States Permanent Resident Card.
degree.” This example typifies many statements made by my interviewees indicating the importance of family educational background in shaping a child’s perception of school.

Discussion of family educational background also invites analysis on the effects of siblings’ education on Dalit students. Unfortunately, the data indicate that many Dalit students face the issue of dropout among siblings. While dropout rates in Nepal are high for all children,\(^78\) they are especially high for Dalit children.\(^79\) As discussed in chapter 1, about half of the Dalit children enrolled in schools do not finish primary education.\(^80\) My research presented a pattern: if a child has a sibling who dropped out of school, then the child tended to have fewer hopes for his own success at school. Anisha R from Lalitpur, whose two siblings had dropped out from secondary school, remained silent when I asked her if she believed that being at school is important. In fact, she didn’t want to answer any school related questions. A comment from Birkhe U further highlights this issue: “Both of my siblings dropped out of school. My sister dropped out when she was in grade 7, and my brother dropped out in grade 8. Although I want to stay in school, I don’t know what future holds for me.” From these stories, we see siblings leaving school without graduating appears to contribute to a negative message about school.

However, the issue of sibling effect is not entirely clear. This is because in addition to the impact of siblings, there are other factors that either motivate or demotivate a child from going to school. For example, Namita R is doing very well in her school despite the fact that her brother dropped out when he was in sixth grade. In fact, she holds second position in her class, and her teachers are very proud of her achievements. Access to a lower caste

\(^78\) DoE, \textit{Flash I Report 2012-013}.
\(^80\) IIDS, \textit{A Study on Nepal}, 124.
teacher, high expectations from teachers, and positive relationship with peers seem to have influenced NamitaR’s academic performance.

The story of KabindraU is even more striking than NamitaR’s. One of his brothers dropped out when he was in grade 3, but KabindraU has no intention of dropping out of school. In fact, he wants to get a Masters degree, probably in Social Work. What is exceptional about him is that he is aware of the levels of education beyond 10th grade. Over 50% of the students I interviewed had no idea of what getting a Bachelors and Masters degree meant. KabindraU definitely has a lot more exposure than other students, and he gives the credit to the scholarship he received through a Christian organization. As a requirement of the scholarship, KabindraU lives in a boys’ hostel rather than at his home. “I live at a place where everyone is striving for a great academic path. People are so hardworking here and you will find some students studying until two in the morning. I need to keep up with that,” he said. The scholarship has provided KabindraU with an opportunity to be a part of an intellectually stimulating environment and has motivated him to emulate the academic work ethic of his fellow hostel residents.

In conclusion, the analysis has demonstrated that family educational background has effects on school perceptions and motivations of Dalit students. Dalit students with educated family members tend to have a positive attitude towards schools and higher expectations. However, it should be recognized that Dalit students, whose family members have low educational attainment, could also be equally motivated and perform well in schools. The reason behind that is in addition to family educational background, there are various other factors that impact the lived experience of Dalit students, as we saw in the

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81 The Christian organization started by “foreign” Christians, supports children from socio-economically challenged families such as the Dalits.
cases of NamitaR and KabindraU.

Economic Status

Among the contextual variables used in education research, socioeconomic status is probably one of most widely used. Various researchers have examined the relation of socioeconomic background and academic achievement.\(^8^2\) One such study by Sean Reardon of Stanford University, investigated the extent to which the rising income inequality in the US has widened the achievement gap between children in high-and low-income families.\(^8^3\) Analyzing the data from 19 nationally representative studies, Reardon found that, the achievement gap between children in high- and low-income families has grown substantially in recent decades.\(^8^4\) His explanation for the increase include: 1) the growing difference in income distribution between families; 2) differential investments in children’s cognitive development – children from high-income families have more time and resources invested in them; iii) strong correlation of income with other socioeconomic characteristics of families, which means that high-income families have greater socioeconomic and social resources that benefit their children; and 4) differentiation in school quality and schooling opportunities between the rich and the poor.\(^8^5\) While the finding of this study isn’t directly transferable to the Nepali context, it is helpful in understanding the effects of family employment and income on the school experience of Dalit students, especially because


\(^8^4\) Ibid., 100.

\(^8^5\) Ibid.
Dalits are among the poorest in the country (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Poverty Incidence by Caste/Ethnicity in Nepal 2010/11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/ethnicity</th>
<th>Population below poverty line (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Brahman (hill)</td>
<td>10.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Chhetri (hill)</td>
<td>23.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Brahman (Terai)</td>
<td>18.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.Middle caste (Terai)</td>
<td>28.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.Dalits (hill)</td>
<td>43.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.Dalits (Terai)</td>
<td>38.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.Newar</td>
<td>10.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.Janjati (hill)</td>
<td>28.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.Janjati (hill)</td>
<td>25.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.Muslim</td>
<td>20.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.others</td>
<td>12.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>25.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: In Nepal, people earning below Rs. 14,430 (~$144) per year are considered to be below the poverty line.86

In the context of my study, the income of only few families across the three districts was solely based on traditional jobs such as scavenging, leather works, sewing clothes, or playing musical instruments (see Table 2.3). And even those families have modernized their traditional jobs by working in factories or opening their own shops in and outside the country. For example, RamR’s father migrated from Nawalparasi to India and runs a small

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tailoring shop there. Few families have positions in the army, schools or run other business.

As a whole, agricultural work, and labor in foreign countries seem to be the two most common sources of income for the families of the interviewed Dalit students.

Table 2.3. Urban/Rural and Geographical Distribution (By Numbers) of Main Source of Family Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Source of Income</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Urban/Rural</th>
<th>Geographical Regions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Work</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Caste related)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Employment</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (labor work, business)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Created by author using research data.*

*Note: Some families had more than one source of income, but only the main source of income for each family has been included in the table.*

Because of the high density of population in urban areas, agriculture has become a main source of income for rural families. Across the districts utilized in my research, as Table 2.3 indicates, families in rural areas are more involved in agriculture than families in urban areas. In addition, geography seems to influence the involvement of families in agriculture. Families in Sindhupalchok and Lalitpur (Hill Dalits) are more involved in agriculture than families in Nawalparasi (Terai Dalits). The reason behind this is that Terai Dalits own less land in comparison to Hill Dalits. According to a local NGO, Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization (NNDSWO), 15% of Hill Dalits and 44% of Terai Dalits were landless in 2009. However, because high caste families control most of the fertile land, both Hill and Terai Dalits commonly rent additional land from the higher castes or

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work as agricultural labor for them. This was evident in the districts utilized in my research. In the villages of Nawalparasi and Lalitpur, Dalit families hardly owned any land and most commonly worked as agricultural laborers for higher castes. However, in the village of Sindhupalchok, most Dalit families owned some land. In order to supplement their income, they tended to rent additional land from the higher castes with excess land. The case was the same with rural families from Lalitpur.

Analysis of the interviews indicated that the Dalit students from families whose main source of income was agriculture, saw school as a way out from being stuck in the agricultural sector. This was true for participants from all three districts. One of the participants SangamR said, “I go to school because I want to have better jobs than my parents. I don’t want to become farmers like them.” Another participant RamR said, “I don’t want to struggle like my parents. I want to be a big person in the future.”

Dalit students like SangamR and RamR see that their parents work very hard in the fields, and yet make little money. Also, it doesn’t make them happy to see that their parents work as employees of the higher castes. Thus, they don’t want to be a part of the same cycle. While many of these students aspire to have a more successful life compared to their parents, these students doubt that they will ever be able to reach their goals. Because of the nature of the parents’ work, most of these students miss several school days. They reported that their contribution to their families includes taking care of younger siblings, preparing food, helping parents in the field, going to the market to sell the produce, looking after cattle, and working in the neighbor’s field to return their help or to make extra money.

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most Dalit families, younger children don’t have to perform many of these duties. Typically, they stay at home and look after the cattle. The kinds of the responsibilities Dalit students hold lead to a significant loss in their learning. For example, in the past 3 months, NituR has missed 16 days of school because she had to help her mom in the field. As a result, she is behind in her coursework, but she didn’t have a choice. Another student, KeshavU said, “I didn’t go to school for three days because I had to help my parents in the field. Sometimes, I come back home during the lunchtime to prepare food for my parents. It’s like taking half day off because the lunchtime is only 40 minutes and I don’t get everything done within that time. So, I just don’t go back to school.”

While the higher caste children with families in the agricultural sector also have to contribute their part, higher caste children have to do less in comparison to Dalit children. This is because most of the higher caste families are well off in comparison to Dalit families, and they are capable of hiring lower castes to work for them. For example, I was in rural Sindhupalchok and rural Lalitpur during the rice-planting season, and I noticed that many Dalit students along with their parents worked as a labor for higher caste households. While the higher caste students helped their parents as well, the Dalit students had additional work in that they worked for many higher caste households to supplement their parent’s income. Luckily, the students were on holidays and didn’t miss school. However, they could have used that time for their schoolwork.

The constraints on their study time and lack of parental resources have negative effects on the academic performance of Dalit students. Some permanently withdraw from school, finding it too difficult to catch up, and even those who prevail are very uncertain

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89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
about their future. For students from low-income families, particularly those involved in agriculture, the cost of higher education made it seem unattainable and they would therefore rarely hope and plan for an education beyond the 10th grade. When I asked those students what level of education they wanted to attain or what they wanted to become in the future, they responded by saying that they don’t know and that they will think about it after the 10th grade national exam (School Leaving Certificate or SLC).

By contrast, children who have family members working in other countries seemed to be doing well in school. Due to the current high unemployment rate, many Nepalese, especially young men, travel abroad to work as laborers in India, Malaysia and gulf countries like Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. According to a 2012 World Bank report, Nepal is one of the top recipients of foreign worker remittances, accounting for over 25% of GDP in 2012 (see Figure 2.2). Also, Nepal is now one of the largest exporters of migrant labor in South Asia. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to fully address the consequences of this labor migration, I will call attention to how the money sent back home and the increased awareness of opportunities in foreign countries affect Dalit education.

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Among the three research districts, the Dalit children from Nawalparasi (both rural and urban) had the highest number of family members working outside Nepal. One of the reasons for this could be the fact that Nawalparasi is in the Terai region and families in that region own little agricultural land. Out of the 23 Dalit children from Nawalparasi, 15 had at least one family member working abroad. Interestingly, 12 out of 15 of these children held top positions in their grades, and some have even achieved distinction (above 80%) in their exams. This is significant because not a lot of students from public school receive
distinction. And those who do get distinction are usually from the higher castes. Examination of the data from the interviews indicated that good academic performances of children with families abroad results from the fact that they have more time to study at home, unlike others, who have to work with their parents. In addition, availability of resources at home appears to make a huge difference in their academic performance. Because of the improved economic situation, high-income Dalit families are able to hire tutors for their children. Analysis of the interviews revealed that Dalit students from such families typically hire tutors for classes in Math, Science, and English. These are the subjects, which have a high failure rate in the SLC exam, as we can see from the data presented in Figure 2.3. Thus, being able to afford individual tutors puts these Dalit children in a better position than those with no such resources. These findings are in line with Reardon’s argument that high-income parents can invest more in cognitive development of their children.

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**Figure 2.3. SLC Failure Rate by Subjects in 2014**

93 Ibid.
Apart from access to more time and resources at home, the positive influence of foreign employment is also manifested in the encouragement that the Dalit students get from their family members working abroad. For example, HarimayaU said, “My father works as a laborer in Qatar. When he was there, he met other Nepali students who are on student visa and saw how different their experience was compared to his own. Thus, he always tells me that just like those Nepali students, I should study hard and be able to compete in the global education market.” Other Dalit students who have family members working abroad made similar comments. The crucial point here is that these students are not only being encouraged to do well in school but that, increasingly, they are also encouraged to think about their education from a global perspective.

During my research, I detected a similar shift in perspective among affluent Dalit students without family members abroad as well. SandeshU, a boy living in urban Lalitpur provided a particularly insightful story. His parents own a jewelry shop in the city where they make and sell silver earrings, necklaces, anklets, etc. According to SandeshU, their business is doing very well. Apart from their shop, they also own a five storeyed house in the city, which is very unusual for a Dalit family. Because of high economic status, SandeshU was able to get his own computer at home and Internet access, which he frequently uses to learn more about Science (animals, solar system) and about other countries. He told me that he has seen videos, pictures and read articles about Saudi Arabia through YouTube and Google: “I like finding out more about the world outside of Nepal.”
SandeshU even has a Facebook account. Given the lack of access to the Internet among the majority of my research participants, and in Nepal in general – about 9% of the total population used Internet in 2012 - SandeshU definitely has a knowledge advantage over other students who don’t have the same resources.\textsuperscript{94} It was not surprising to me, then, to learn that he holds 4\textsuperscript{th} position out of 43 students in his class and feels very positively about school.

In terms of educational background, both of SandeshU’s parents have only finished primary school. According to SandeshU, they dropped out of school for economic reasons. Thus, they want to provide SandeshU with as many resources as possible so that he can succeed in school. While SandeshU does have neither caste advantage nor highly educated parents, his high economic status has been a crucial factor for his positive educational journey.

Analysis of the research data on access to English language also suggests the powerful influence of economic status. Some public schools in Nepal have started offering two mediums of instruction – one in English and one in Nepali.\textsuperscript{95} Affluent parents, regardless of caste, now place their children in the English-medium section when there is a choice.\textsuperscript{96} In my research context, the rural school in Nawalparasi and the urban school in Sindhupalchok were the two schools that offered classes in English. In both the schools, there was a clear distinction between the economic status of the students who were enrolled in the English-medium section and those who were enrolled in the Nepali-medium


section. Typically, Dalit students whose family members were involved in agriculture or more traditional jobs were enrolled in the Nepali-medium section and Dalit students with family members abroad were enrolled in the English-medium section. Finally, some of the affluent Dalit children get extra help from English tutors at home and some even have a chance to attend private schools before they join public schools.

The popularity of English in Nepal, or “English-mania” is because Nepalese relate English to a modern, educated, international citizen. In other words, knowing English is tied to social status in Nepal. This is especially important for Dalits because acquisition of English provides them a way to uplift their low social status. As a result, affluent Dalit students like SandeshU who speak English, as opposed to Dalit students from poor families who can’t afford English education, are more respected in school both by teachers and peers. This respect, in turn, increases their motivation to go to school.

To conclude, consistent with Reardon’s findings, my research found a correlation between economic status and school experiences of Dalit students. Due to the affluence of their families, typically involved in foreign employment, high-income Dalit students are in a privileged position. This privileged position becomes clear when we look carefully at all Dalit students’ access to educational resources, available study time, perceptions of future possibilities, and investment in English language instruction. The reality is a sad one for Dalit students from low-income families, typically involved in agriculture. The combination of their low caste status and low economic status creates a feedback mechanism that produces an even more unequal school experiences for them.

97 Ibid.
98 The impact of social relationships on the school experience of Dalit students will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.
Neighborhood Effects

Along with family educational background and economic status, neighborhood characteristics are also influential determinants of students’ school experiences. In 2002, James Ainsworth from Georgia State University published a study in which he examined the issue of educational failure of youth from inner-city neighborhoods in the US.99 Using the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 linked to 1990 census information, Ainsworth analyzed the impact of “mediators of neighborhood effects,” which include collective socialization, social control, social capital, perceptions of occupational opportunity, and institutional characteristics.100 Focusing primarily on the time spent on homework and educational achievement (student math/reading test scores), Ainsworth found that these mediators had significant effects on educational outcomes, with collective socialization i.e. the role-modeling processes, having the strongest influence.101 In other words, collective socialization was central to the prediction of time spent on homework and scores on achievement tests.102 Ainsworth argues that the presence of high-status residents, i.e. positive role models, in neighborhoods help foster behaviors and attitudes that are conductive to success both in both school and at work.103 In fact, Ainsworth found that the influence of high-status neighbors is so important that it rivals the predictive power

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100 In the context of Ainsworth’s study (see 119-121), collective socialization refers to the role-modeling processes; social control refers to the monitoring and sanctioning of deviant behavior, social capital refers to amount of social networks; perceptions of occupational opportunity refers to the beliefs of students regarding the link between their academic effort and the job opportunities; and institutional characteristics refer to the quality of schools and teachers.
101 Ibid., 142.
102 Ibid., 135-138.
103 Ibid., 131.
of many family and school factors.” For example, in prediction of time spent on homework, the number of role models was found to be more important than parental involvement and private school attendance.

Ainsworth’s study helped me make sense of the connections I discovered, in my own research, between neighborhood differences and the school experiences of Dalit students. While reviewing my interview materials, it became apparent that student perceptions and academic performances varied with different housing patterns. Typically, the Dalit students who came from neighborhoods with mixed housing patterns seemed more aware of the importance of education and the range of possible career pathways than students living in caste-segregated neighborhoods. While I was first thinking of this gap in terms of urban-rural and regional differences, Ainsworth’s observations made me realize that the decisive factor was the greater exposure and access to role models found in mixed communities.

Previous studies on Dalits have mainly discussed the caste-based segregation observed in communities in terms of caste discrimination and the exclusion of Dalits in Nepal. In “Comparative Study of Dalit Education in Nepal,” Mom Bishwakarma, described how caste-based segregation leads to the concentration of resources, including schools, in higher caste communities. He pointed out that even in areas with a Dalit majority, schools are still constructed in higher caste neighborhoods. As a result, access to education is compromised for Dalit children. The greater distances between home and

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
school — Bishwakarma notes that in some parts the commute can take 1-2 hours — become an obstacle for many Dalit children.\(^{109}\) While children from all castes, especially in rural areas, have to travel long distances to reach their schools due to the physical remoteness of the place,\(^{110}\) the social distance created by caste-based segregation further exacerbates the inaccessibility for Dalit students. This inaccessibility could be part of the reason for low school participation of Dalit students. For example, analyzing the data from Nepal Living Standards Survey-II,\(^{111}\) Shyam KC found that geographical inaccessibility is detrimental to school enrollment.\(^{112}\) In addition, KC found that schools are more inaccessible for children from disadvantaged families including the Dalits, thus resulting in lower school enrollment.\(^{113}\) Suggestively, mixing of different castes in a neighborhood might improve school accessibility and enrollment for Dalit children.

In addition to the positive influence on enrollment of Dalits, the mixing of different castes in a neighborhood, as my research has shown, also has an additional benefit, namely, the exposure and access to a variety of role models. Surprisingly, there are hardly any studies that have explored the phenomenon of role models in relation to the caste-based arrangement of neighborhoods in Nepal. A 2007 study by Eimar Barr et al. briefly touched upon the lack of role models by pointing out that the proportion of Dalit teachers and Dalit political leaders is low in the country.\(^{114}\) However, the study didn’t explore the interaction

\(^{109}\) Ibid.
\(^{111}\) Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) provides data related to employment, poverty, and economic growth in Nepal.
\(^{113}\) Ibid.
\(^{114}\) Barr et al., Dalits in India and Nepal, 16.
between the neighborhood and access to role models. This section of the chapter, thus, adds to the current research by providing an analysis of the effects of neighborhood housing patterns on the access to role models and further on the Dalit students’ motivations, and perceptions of schooling outcomes.

### Table 2.4. Caste-based Distributions of Students’ Neighborhoods in the Three Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Urban/Rural</th>
<th>Total Students from Mixed Neighborhoods</th>
<th>Total Students from Segregated Neighborhoods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sindhupalchok</td>
<td>Mountain (Himalayan)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10 out of 10</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>10 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalitpur</td>
<td>Hilly</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>8 out of 8</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>10 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawalparasi</td>
<td>Terai</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>9 out of 10</td>
<td>1 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10 out of 13</td>
<td>3 out of 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37 out of 61</td>
<td>24 out of 61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Created by author using research data.*

As Table 2.4 shows, almost all of the Dalit students in urban areas came from mixed neighborhoods: the housing pattern was such that the higher castes and the lower castes lived together. Due to the availability of various facilities such as hospitals, roads, factories, and schools, urban areas have received an influx of population from all parts of the country. As a result of this movement, urban areas have become more diverse. Thus, in urban areas, there are regular interactions between the higher caste, and the lower caste communities resulting in greater exposure and access to role models for the Dalit students. This is especially important because there are very few Dalit role models that the Dalit students can look up to: the higher castes dominate prominent positions in education, economy, and
politics throughout the country.\textsuperscript{115} Thus, as Ainsworth would agree, having exposure to the “successful” castes can be fruitful for Dalit students, particularly in communities, which have created more inclusive climates. Comments made by several students during the interviews carry this sentiment.

A student from urban Sindhupalchok, RamilaU, explains the role of a higher caste neighbor who instilled a desire in her to be a social worker: “A brother\textsuperscript{116} in my area was a newspaper writer. He used to tell me that he wants to serve the society through his writing. While he isn’t with us anymore, his vision is alive. I also want to serve the society by providing a voice for the Dalits and women. I want to be a social worker.” RamilaU’s comment is a powerful depiction of the influence role models could have on young children in their communities. Having been inspired by the positive work that the brother was doing, RamilaU developed a similar interest to serve her society in her own ways, and lead the legacy that the brother left behind.

Another student, AratiU, also from urban Sindhupalchok, mentioned a Dalit neighbor as her role model: “Sagar brother is currently in Kathmandu\textsuperscript{117} pursuing his Bachelors degree. When he was here, he used to help me with my schoolwork. When he comes back, he sits down with me and tells me that I should work hard. I also want to go to Kathmandu after high school to study science.” While AratiU got her motivation to go to Kathmandu for further studies from Sagar, her interest to pursue science in college comes from a higher caste brother who is currently a science teacher at a local school. “The way

\textsuperscript{116} To show respect, people in Nepal address elders by ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘aunt’, etc. even though they might not be related.
\textsuperscript{117} Kathmandu is the capital of the country.
he explains the topics in science is phenomenal. I just want to keep learning more,” said AratiU. It appears that the access to both Sagar, and the science teacher has positively influenced the educational path AratiU wants to pursue. It’s also interesting to note the differences between the two role models: Sagar isn’t a part of everyday life and social fabric of AratiU, but when he comes home for holidays, he encourages and provides outside perspective to AratiU. The science teacher on the other hand, is a part of what Ainsworth calls a “collective socialization” process, and is present over time in AratiU’s life.

Looking at the interview data of urban Lalitpur, the powerful effects of mixed caste environment on Dalit students was noted in similar ways to that of urban Sindhupalchok. For example, KabindraU, who lives in a hostel with students from various castes said, “I love that I get to interact with people from different castes here. I don’t have to confine myself within a designated area like I had to when I was back in my village. I have both lower castes and higher caste people that I look up to. Together, they support me and encourage me to do well in school.” It’s clear from KabindraU’s comment that he enjoys being able share the same space with people from different castes.

The findings of my research in urban Nawalparasi were parallel to the findings in urban Lalitpur and urban Sindhupalchok. During the interview, one student, RajU, explained to me how Manita, a higher caste and daughter of RajU’s house owner, has influenced him by her example. According to RajU, Manita works very hard and continuously pushes RajU to do so by studying with him. Since, RajU’s family rents part of Manita’s house, RajU and Manita not only live in the same neighborhood, they also share the same house. The concrete lived experience that RajU has through sharing the house and studying together with Manita has thus positively influenced RajU’s education. In terms of
career interest, RajU wants to become an army, just like Krishna, who belongs to RajU’s own caste: “Hearing stories about Krishna uncle’s experience in the army is fascinating. It makes me want to live that experience as well. And a great thing about the job is that I will be serving my country.” While Manita, by involving the process of “collective socialization” helps RajU in the moment, Krishna uncle, during his visits back home, encourages him to have a dream of serving the country by joining the army.

As comments from the students from urban areas indicate, an access to a mixture of role models, and the availability of a variety of jobs in urban areas give a sense of more possibility for the Dalit students. For the Dalit students from rural areas, the experience is very different. Unlike in urban areas where majority of Dalit students live in mixed neighborhoods, many rural areas still maintain segregated neighborhoods. During my visit to the three districts, I noticed that in rural Sindhupalchok and rural Lalitpur, higher castes live on one side of the neighborhood whereas the lower castes live on the other side. However, rural Nawalparasi was quite different: most neighborhoods are mixed (see Table 2.4). The difference was because of the geographical location of Nawalparasi district, which will be tackled later in the section.

According to the Dalit students in rural Sindhupalchok and rural Lalitpur, outside of the school area, they have very low interaction with the higher castes. As a result, the Dalit students in the rural areas weren’t able to have the same exposure and access to role models like that of the students who lived in urban areas.

In rural Sindhupalchok, 3 out of the 10 students I interviewed stated that there is no one in particular in their neighborhood that they look up to. Five of the other students mentioned the same person, Bishnu, as their role model. Bishnu is in 12th grade now and is
pursuing a course in commerce. Two years ago, Bishnu was the only one who passed the SLC exam from the entire village. Last year was even worse: no one passed the exam. If Bishnu passes his 12th grade and pursues a Bachelor degree, he will be the first one to do so. Given the situation of the elders in the village, some of the students that I interviewed expressed uncertainty over their own future. Upon asking what he wants to become in the future, JanakR said, “I haven’t thought about anything. I don’t even know if I will pass the SLC. You know very few people from my community pass the exam.” In lack of exposure, and direct evidence of academically successful adults in his neighborhood, it’s hard for students like JanakR to imagine how their educational journey will unravel in the future.

In rural Lalitpur, the Dalit students had more role models from their neighborhood. Among the ones that the students mentioned were two students and one teacher. Sita is a 12th grade student pursuing her nursing course in Kathmandu; Hari is a Math teacher at a primary school in the village; and Shyam is a Bachelor student in Kathmandu. Because of these three members, the Dalit students seem to see the difference education can make in their lives. However, they would have a greater exposure and access to role models had they been living in mixed neighborhoods.

Furthermore, the remoteness of the rural areas, and the lack of a variety in the types of occupations limit the possibility for the Dalit students. While the students from urban areas are exposed to an array of industries such as banks, hospitals, and media, the economy in rural areas is heavily based on agriculture. Thus, in general, the Dalit students in rural areas are more disadvantaged: they not only live in constrained social environments enforced by caste, they also have limited exposure to job opportunities.

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There are exceptions. Unlike in rural Sindhupalchok and rural Lalitpur, where the communities were completely segregated, the majority of the Dalit students in rural Nawalparasi had access to both the lower castes and the higher castes. The reason behind this mixed settlement is the geographic location of Nawalparasi. It lies in the Terai region, where a large and heterogeneous population settled in following the malaria eradication program in the 1960s. This population constitutes of the people from various castes who had originally moved from the Hilly region to the Terai region in search of arable land. In fact, Terai is commonly referred to as the “breadbasket of Nepal.” The flat topography of the Terai region has made it more accessible to the migrants than the rest of the country. More developed facilities such as education, and communication technology in the Terai region also serve as an attraction to the migrants.

As a result of the heterogeneous settlement, Dalits and the higher castes in Nawalparasi regularly encounter each other in the same shared space. The positive effect of this mixed settlement is reflected in the comments made by the Dalit students in the district. SujanR, for example, mentioned a higher caste neighbor whom he considers an inspiration:

Everyone in our area knows Prem brother. He did really well in high school and then got a scholarship to study in Australia. He finished his Bachelors degree and is now working there. He is my hero. When he comes back to Nepal, he always tells me that I should also study hard so that I can do well in the future. I would like to go abroad to study as well. But in the future, I want to become a great politician, one with a brain because there aren’t many here [he laughed].

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120 Ibid.
121 Bista, Fatalism and Development, 12.
123 Bista, Fatalism and Development, 12.
The above comment indicates that Prem’s educational background, global perspective and support have greatly influenced SujanR. Prem’s education in Australia is an evidence to SujanR that if he works hard, it’s also possible for him to access international educational opportunities. Another student, AkashR, talked about a Dalit engineer who he greatly admires: “Santosh brother is intelligent and very devoted. He provides free tuition classes to me in math and science because he wants me to succeed. I hope to be a successful businessman in the future and make the brother proud.”

By observing their neighbors who have done well because of their education, SujanR and AkashR see the benefits of attending school. Multiple educational and career pathways are locally available and socially supported for them. If these students were living in a segregated neighborhood, they wouldn’t have had the same exposure and access to role models. RameshR, who lives in a segregated neighborhood in the district, said that there is no one in particular in his neighborhood that he looks up to: “I am one of the few students who is doing well in school. Even my uncle wants me to learn driving and go to a foreign country to work as a driver.” It's clear that RameshR doesn't have the same exposure and access to role models as SujanR and AkashR do in their neighborhoods. However, RameshR added that he is fortunate to have a Dalit teacher in his school: “At least I have someone in school that I can look up to. Maybe I can also become a teacher like him in the future. I don’t know.” If RameshR were to live in an area similar to that of the other two students where he could have gotten more exposure, he would have a better sense of what he could do with his education in the future.

To sum, my research found that that mixed neighborhoods have a positive effect on Dalit students. As a consequence of greater exposure and access to role models – one who
is directly involved in students’ lives through the “collective socialization” process, as well as one who make visits over vacations - the Dalit students who come from mixed neighborhoods, such as the ones in urban Sindhupalchok, urban Lalitpur and in Nawalparasi district, appear to be more aware of the importance of education and different career pathways than the Dalit students who belong to the neighborhoods segregated by caste. By observing neighbors who finish school more often and obtain reputable jobs increases the expectations about the benefits of attending school. Furthermore, the availability of various job opportunities in urban areas is an added benefit for the Dalit students who reside in those areas. It provides them a sense of more possibilities. On the other hand, Dalit students from the rural areas are disadvantaged in some ways due to the remoteness of the place in which they live in, and the lack of a variety of job opportunities.

Summary

This chapter has examined the school experiences of Dalit students by teasing out three decisive social context factors: i) Family Educational Background, ii) Economic Status, and iii) Neighborhood Effects. Through a close analysis of each of these factors, it was found that they interact in powerful ways to shape and influence Dalit students’ school experience. First, the analysis of data on participating students’ families indicated that Dalit students who grew up with educated family members tend to have positive attitudes towards school, are highly motivated, and experience high expectations. While the effects of family educational background are profound, it should be noted that due to the influence of other factors such as the economic status, Dalit students who grew up with less educated family members could also be equally motivated and perform well in school. Second,
economic status plays a vital role in creating a gap between the school experiences of high- and low-income Dalit students. Economic status affects one’s access to educational resources, attitudes towards English language instruction, available study time, and perceptions of future possibilities. Coming from an affluent family can, to some extent, compensate for the negative effects associated with low parental education and the disadvantages of a low caste status. Finally, students coming from mixed neighborhoods are at an advantage insofar as they have greater exposure and access to a variety of role models. Through the encouragement and outside perspective, or through everyday involvement with students’ lives, these role models raise their awareness of the opportunities and different career paths that open up with a better education.
Chapter Three – Influence of the School Environment

The aim of this chapter is to provide an account of school-related factors that, according to my research, tend to be the most powerful determinants of Dalit students’ school experience. In addition, whereas previous scholarly work has focused on these factors individually, my own analysis calls attention to the different ways in which these factors relate to each other and their combined educational impact. Through a close examination of each of these factors and the complex ways in which these factors interact, I hope to provide a clearer and more comprehensive portrait of Dalit children’s school experience. Factors, which will be examined include: i) Caste of Teachers, ii) Teachers’ Expectations, iii) School Curriculum, iv) Dalit Scholarship Programs, and v) Relationship with Peers.

Caste of Teachers

Looking at Ram sir, who is also a Dalit, brings a smile on my face. He makes me believe that being a Dalit doesn’t mean that I am disabled. I can also achieve success. – SamjhanaR, Rural Nawalparasi

Numerous studies have investigated the educational effects of teacher-student “mismatch” with regards to their racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. In one study, Robert Heath of Stanford University, attempted to determine 1) whether students’

perception of the ability of white teachers to relate to their students was a function of the students’ own ethnic background, and 2) whether different teaching styles were associated with white teachers’ ability to relate to student groups from different ethnic backgrounds.\textsuperscript{125} Heath’s study revealed that the white students, on the average, rated the 50 white teacher-interns higher on the ability-to-relate than did the black students.\textsuperscript{126} In addition, the relative importance of one of the teaching style characteristics was substantially different for the two student groups. Whereas “clarity of speech” was the characteristic most highly associated with ability-to-relate for black students, it was the least important in the data for the white students.\textsuperscript{127} This finding makes sense, explains Heath, because the black students were trying to learn from a teacher whose way of speaking English was different from their own. While this study was conducted in the US, the light it sheds on the relationship between a teacher’s background and student perceptions of their pedagogical effectiveness is helpful for thinking about the Dalit experience as well.

In relation to teachers’ social background, one of the major issues in the education system in Nepal is the lack of Dalit representation among school teachers. The proportions of Dalit teachers at primary, lower secondary and secondary levels are 4.5\%, 3.1\% and 3.6\% respectively, whereas the share of Dalit students is 20.3\% at primary level,\textsuperscript{128} 14.6\% at lower secondary, and 10.6\% at secondary level.\textsuperscript{129} This low representation of Dalit teachers was also evident in the six schools included in my research.

\textsuperscript{125} Heath, “The Ability to Relate,” 1.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} DoE, \textit{Flash I Report 2012-013}, 37.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 22.
Table 3.1. Caste Distributions of Teachers in the Six Schools in the Three Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Number of Dalit Teachers</th>
<th>Total Number of Teachers in the School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sindhupalchok</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalitpur</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawalparasi</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Created by author using the research data.

The need to increase the number of Dalit teachers in order to improve the school experience of Dalit students has been recognized before by both policy makers and scholars.\(^{130}\) For example, in order to address the issue of social disparity in the schools, the Nepali government proposed an action plan in 2003, which included measures to help enforce the already existing recruitment policy of increasing female teachers and teachers from other disadvantaged groups.\(^ {131}\) In 2005, *The Technical Review*, a survey report commissioned by the National Planning Commission and the Nepal Ministry of Finance, noted that, just as female teachers tend to attract more girl students, Dalit staff members have a positive impact on Dalit student enrollments.\(^ {132}\) However, while there has been an


\(^{131}\) MoES, *National Plan of Action*.

increase in female members in School Management Committees (SMC) and among faculty, similar progress for Dalits hasn’t been achieved.133

Drawing upon Heath’s study, the key observation that I want to make concerning teacher backgrounds and Dalit students is that, in addition to their positive effect on enrollment, the presence of Dalit teachers also improves Dalit students’ ability to relate to their teachers, and their access to role models at school. Obviously, the racial relations in the US are not directly mappable onto the Nepali caste system but, nevertheless, Heath’s study calls attention to the importance of social relatability. This is especially important because it compensates for the students who live in segregated neighborhoods without the same access to local role models as the ones living in mixed neighborhoods.

The Dalit students I interviewed in rural Sindhupalchok and rural Nawalparasi were very pleased that they had a Dalit teacher in their school. It should be noted that it’s coincidental that both schools with Dalit teachers happened to be rural, a finding which cannot be generalized. In rural Sindhupalchok, out of the 13 teachers, only one was a Dalit. This teacher worked with kindergarten students so the students I interviewed stated that they don’t interact with this teacher very much. However, the students did mention that they appreciated having a representative of their caste in the school faculty. The general feeling of the students was that the teacher showed them that Dalits are also capable of holding a teaching position, which is a position traditionally associated with Brahmins.

In rural Nawalparasi, out of the 22 teachers, only one was a Dalit as well. Unlike the Dalit teacher in Sindhupalchok, this teacher held a Bachelor of Science in physics and taught courses at several levels up to 10th grade. As SamjhanaR’s comment (quoted at the

133 Bennett Lynn et al., Unequal Citizens, 78; Barr et al., Dalits in India and Nepal, 16.
beginning of this section) demonstrates, this teacher made her believe that her caste wasn’t her disability; he taught her to have hopes and to dream for a successful life. Like SamjhanaR, many other students have been inspired by the Dalit teacher’s own success. AshmitaR, another student in rural Nawalparasi said, ”Despite being a Dalit, he was able to get a degree in physics, one of the toughest subjects. It’s not a joke! Thus, I believe that if I work hard, I can also be successful. Having him at school is a great thing. He encourages us to come to school regularly and is always there to support.” AshmitaR has been inspired by the Dalit teachers’ educational success, as well as his behaviors, and believes that similar kind of success is possible for her.

Comments made by SamjhanaR and AshmitaR, thus stress the importance of having Dalit teachers in schools. Dalit teachers can serve as role models for the Dalit children and can have a positive impact on students’ academic success. Unlike many Dalit children in other schools, the Dalit children in rural Nawalparasi have a very good academic standing. Of the 13 interviewed children, 6 of them hold top 5 positions in their grades (see Table 3.2). Since the class position was assigned to only the top 5 students at this school, I have presented the class of division to represent the academic standing of other students.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{134}Based on the percentages that students receive, they are put in a certain class of division. There are five such classes: Distinction (>80%), First Division (60% – 79%), Second Division (45% – 64%), Third Division (32% - 44%), and Fail (0% - 31%).
Table 3.2. The Academic Standing of the Dalit Students in Rural Nawalparasi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Class Position</th>
<th>Division</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. SanuR</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. RamR</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. AshmitaR</td>
<td></td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. RajanR</td>
<td>4 out of 15</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. MayaR</td>
<td>1 out of 33</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. BipanaR</td>
<td></td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. AkashR</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Failed in Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. SujanR</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. NamitaR</td>
<td>2 out of 42</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. SamjhanaR</td>
<td>5 out of 48</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. BikashR</td>
<td>1 out of 19</td>
<td>Distinction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. KamalaR</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. RameshR</td>
<td>1 out of 45</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Created by author using the research data.

The academic success of these students isn’t necessarily a direct effect of access to a Dalit teacher, as we have seen in Chapter Two that various aspects of these students’ lives affect their educational experience. Apart from the Dalit teacher as their role model, most of these students also have access to other role models facilitated by the mixed neighborhoods that they are a part of. Nonetheless, the caste of the teachers appears to have a significant impact on Dalit students.

Dalit students in the other four schools that were included in my research seemed
frustrated that they didn’t have any Dalit teachers. “It’s really hard to relate to the teachers in our school. They don’t fully understand what we are going through. I wish we had at least one Dalit teacher,” said ManojR. Another student, RamilaU, thinks that it’s not fair for her school to be a powerhouse of higher caste teachers – “If there were Dalit teachers, maybe we would feel that we are represented and have a voice in school.” Similar to the case of the black students in Heath’s study, Dalit students like ManojR and RamilaU find it difficult to relate to their higher caste teachers. Thus, in order to improve the educational experience for Dalit students, it appears to be very important to have representatives from Dalit communities in schools.

Just having Dalit teachers in schools, however, isn’t enough. Since higher caste teachers teach the majority of the Dalit students, it’s equally important to develop cultural competence in those teachers so that they can effectively engage with Dalit students in a meaningful way. Those teachers must recognize Dalit culture and learn how to engage with it pedagogically. As a way of ensuring a quality and relevant education, the National Plan of Action 2003 has also identified the importance of teacher competency: “An integrated teacher-training program will be developed and implemented in order to improve the teachers’ qualifications and competencies.”

During my research, I was able to explore the benefits of having competent teachers through the lens of the Dalit students I interviewed. In rural Nawalparasi, apart from the one Dalit teacher, the interviewed students frequently mentioned a higher caste teacher, who teaches Nepali course, as a great mentor. Some Dalit students described him as a person who makes time to chat with them, and tries to understand their lives. Some really

135 MoES, National Plan of Action, 27.
liked the fact that he shared inspiring stories of Dalits in the classroom. This teacher is a
great example of a culturally competent teacher. Similar to the teacher who teaches Nepali
course, two teachers in rural Lalitpur, who are Teach for Nepal fellows, were identified as
culturally competent by the Dalit students I interviewed there. In fact, these were the only
teachers that all of the interviewed students mentioned when I asked them to talk about
their favorite teachers. According to the students, these two teachers frequent their home
community and chat with their parents and community members, as well as incorporate
local tools, photographs, and artwork in lessons to demonstrate the richness of the Dalit
culture. As a result, the students feel that these teachers are easily approachable as they
have a much better understanding of what it is like to be a Dalit.

In conclusion, the positive impacts of Dalit teachers on Dalit students are visible in
two main forms: role models, and greater ability-to-relate. Thus, in order to improve the
educational experience of Dalit children, it is crucial to have Dalit representatives on school
faculty and on education committees. Furthermore, with cultural competence, higher caste
teachers can succeed in providing Dalit students with the opportunity to excel academically
and achieve at the high levels that they are capable of achieving.

**Teachers’ Expectations**

Teachers’ expectations of students’ daily and long-term achievements are very
important because teachers plan their instruction based on these beliefs. As Harvard
Professor of Education Charles V. Willie observes, “Teachers cannot educate students in
whom they have no confidence and students cannot learn from teachers in whom they have
no trust.” In other words, reciprocity between teachers’ confidence and students’ trust is important for an effective learning environment. Willie suggests that one way in which teachers convey their confidence in students is through their expectations for those students. When teachers have high expectations of students’ abilities to learn, students are found to perform better. In addition, these expectations make students feel accepted and valued, hence, they begin to trust their teachers and follow their instructions. This reciprocity becomes particularly important because studies have shown that students’ socio-economic backgrounds influence teacher expectations. For example, a study by Tina Wildhagen, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Smith College, found that teachers’ low expectations have high stakes for students of color. In other words, for students of color, the degree to which a teacher expected a student to be successful strongly influenced the degree of success a student actually achieved. After controlling for student characteristics and behaviors, teacher expectations accounted for 42% of the difference in unrealized academic potential of white and black high school students.

In the context of Nepal, students’ caste status appears to exert a powerful influence on teachers’ expectations. In his 2007 study, Lekh N. Paudel found that higher-caste teachers generally do not encourage or give necessary feedback to Dalit students.

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137 Ibid.
138 Ibid., 259.
139 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
142 Lekh N. Paudel, “Power, Knowledge, and Pedagogy: An Analysis of Educational Exclusion of Dalits in Nepal” (PhD diss., Canterbury Christ Church University, 2007), 174, accessed December 9, 2014,
Instead, Dalit students themselves are blamed for not doing well in school. Paudel asserts that the unwillingness of higher-caste teachers in supporting Dalit students stems from those teachers’ fear of change in the power relations. In other words, as a member of non-Dalit community, higher-caste teachers want to maintain the existing caste hierarchy that puts them at an advantage.

Building upon these two studies, in this section, I examine the relationship between teachers’ expectations, Dalit students’ academic performance and their perceptions of school. While doing so, I take into account the differences between segregated and mixed neighborhoods. Finally, I argue that in order to increase Dalit students’ academic performance, it is crucial to have Dalit teachers in schools, and develop cultural competence in higher-caste teachers.

In the context of my study, Dalit students who belonged to segregated neighborhoods (rural Lalitpur and rural Sindhupalchok) often expressed the feeling that their higher-caste teachers expected little from them. The reason behind this could be the fact that unlike in mixed neighborhoods, there is hardly any deep interaction between the higher-castes and the Dalits in segregated neighborhoods. As a result, the higher-caste teachers, who live in those segregated neighborhoods, have very few opportunities to challenge their perceived views of the abilities of their Dalit students.

Let’s look at an example. RitaR, a student from rural Lalitpur, when asked about what her teachers expect from her, said, “I really don’t like my Social Studies teacher. He always makes fun of our caste group in class. He says that education is not our thing. And


143 Ibid.
144 Ibid., 174 - 175.
that the majority of the girls from our caste will elope before we finish the SLC exam. His comments make me really uncomfortable.” RitaR’s comment suggests that the Social Studies teacher doesn’t have high expectations of Dalit children in his class. What is ironic is that as a Social Studies teacher, he should be teaching his students to embrace diversity and treat everyone equally. On the contrary, he is teaching his students that education isn’t meant for Dalits and that they are inferior to the higher castes. Furthermore, generalizing few cases of elopement i.e. girls from the same caste as that of RitaR running away with their partners, the teacher is constantly de-valuing the female Dalit students by questioning their character. Obviously, as Willie would argue, the teacher is not conveying confidence for his students and fails to create a productive learning environment. This explains why all the other Dalit students from RitaR’s school conveyed a lack of trust for this teacher.

Responding to the same question of teachers’ expectations, SangamR from rural Sindhupalchok said, “I don’t think some of my teachers see potentials in us. They don’t believe that we can also be successful. Sometimes, they don’t even call us by our names. I have been called damai145 several times. It really hurts and sometimes I just don’t want to come to school.” The ways in which SangamR’s teachers interact with him appear to be damaging to his motivation, and his overall school experience.

Other ways in which the higher-caste teachers conveyed their low expectations for Dalit students included staying further away physically and calling on higher-caste students (mostly Brahmins and Chhetris) more often to answer questions. The interviewed students stated that the practice of untouchability in schools has decreased but,

145 Damai is a Dalit group and is traditionally associated with playing musical instruments like damaha, hudko, devbaja – particularly in wedding processions. Dalit students find this word offensive. Similar to a black person being called a negro.
nonetheless, some higher caste teachers still have the mindset that Dalit children can’t be successful in schools. Belief that Dalit children fail in school because they are members of that group leads to false perceptions of a student’s ability. Thus, as AstikaR said, “This has to stop. How can we be successful when all that is expected from us is failure?” As many schools fail to create equal, friendly, and comfortable space for Dalit students, there is a high dropout rate among Dalits. About half of the Dalit children enrolled in schools do not finish primary education,\textsuperscript{146} as opposed to the national average of 26\%.\textsuperscript{147}

Conversely, teachers, who express confidence in their students and praise students when they do well, set the foundation for building positive relationships and learning experience. This type of positive regard enhances students’ perceptions of school and motivation to do well. In the context of my research, students who belonged to mixed neighborhoods had greater access to such teachers. For example, SujanR from rural Nawalparasi highly spoke of his teacher who teaches Nepali textbook: “He tells everyone that we should all respect each other. Caste is something that human beings created not the god. So, Dalit students shouldn’t feel inferior to the higher castes. He has really high expectations of us and encourages us on a daily basis.”

Likewise, DhirajU from urban Lalitpur believes that teacher’s expectations mean a lot to a Dalit child like himself because, “You feel that at least someone has faith in you and regards you highly.” He said that he loves his English teacher because rather than just standing in front of the class and giving lectures, the teacher makes an effort to have

\textsuperscript{146} IIDS, \textit{A Study on Nepal}, 124.

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conversation with the students and provides encouragement and support. In addition, “He doesn’t make us feel bad about being a Dalit and this is important!”

I personally can attest to SujanR’s and DhirajU’s comments. Having been born into a Dalit family myself, I was fortunate to have teachers who believed in me. In particular, my chemistry teacher had a great influence on my academic success in school. He called me frequently to answer questions in his class and also made me explain things to friends who didn’t understand certain concepts. He also provided time for me outside of classes to make me aware of various educational opportunities. He fostered a positive learning environment for me and made me believe that caste didn’t define my destination.

Thus, the experiences of interviewed students, as well as my own, suggest that by believing in student’s abilities, holding high expectations, showing interest in their lives, and by acknowledging students’ needs, teachers can produce greater motivation in Dalit children. With teachers’ support, students can improve their academic performance and develop positive perceptions of school. This is why there is an even greater need to both have Dalit representatives on the faculty, and to develop cultural competence in higher-caste teachers. Highly effective teachers will have a deeper understanding of Dalit students’ lives and will, therefore, be equipped to have more “authentic” interactions with these students. As discussed in earlier sections, such teachers will understand and appreciate culturally different strengths and are more likely to provide enriching and responsible learning environments for their Dalit students.

School Curriculum
It’s time to start learning about things they told you you didn’t need to know – learning about me, instead of learning about them ... It’s a connection that makes education education.\textsuperscript{148}

A mainstream-centric curriculum, one that focuses on the dominant group, gives scant attention to the history, culture, and religious experiences of minorities. Such curricula, according to James A. Banks, a specialist in multicultural education, have negative consequences for students from both the dominant and non-dominant cultures.\textsuperscript{149} Banks argues that a mainstream-centric curriculum denies the dominant group the knowledge that studying other cultures can offer as well as “the opportunity to view their [own] culture” from new and alternative perspectives.\textsuperscript{150} For marginalized groups, the course of study fails to “reflect their dreams, hopes and perspectives” and this is a serious problem, Banks suggests, since only when students’ actual life experiences and cultural values are reflected in the curriculum can they be enthusiastic about their education and learn well.\textsuperscript{151}

Unfortunately, the content of existing curricula and textbooks in Nepal continue to under-and mis-represent Dalits and other marginalized groups.\textsuperscript{152} While the need for a more inclusive education has been recognized and adopted by the Nepalese government as one of its key strategic goals, the cultural resources of Dalits are still generally ignored by policymakers, curriculum writers, and educators.\textsuperscript{153} According to the Nepal Dalit Commission’s review of Dalits in textbooks and teacher guides, the caste system is


\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 229-30.


\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 12.
represented in a way that downplays inequities and discrimination. Moreover, the skills particular to the Dalit caste, as well as their contribution to the nation’s history, culture, and economy are rarely mentioned in the curriculum. The unique role played by the Gandharvas, for example, is not addressed in any of the textbooks. As a group of nomadic Sarangi players and singers, the Gandharvas provided both entertainment and vital information at a time when postal services, telephones, and televisions were not available in the country.

Figure 3.1. A Gandharva with His Sarangi

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155 Ibid.
The absence of meaningful representations of Dalit experiences in the national curriculum was noted by several students during my research interviews. Typically, the students would call attention to the failure of the curriculum by mentioning either the contribution of Dalits or the disconnect between the lives portrayed in the curriculum and their own experiences. Student RamilaU put it this way: “We are taught that Nepal is an agriculture based country where over 70% people depend on agriculture. However, we are never taught about Dalits’ contribution in the production of agricultural tools. Why aren’t our skills valued? Why are we not represented in the books we read?”

RamilaU belongs to a Dalit group, the Kami, whose traditional occupation is associated with making and repairing agricultural tools and household utensils such as sickles, axes, spades, and plough tips. She has vivid memories of her grandfather spending long hours making such tools and it angers her, therefore, that what she is taught in school about agriculture in Nepal leaves out the contributions of her relatives and community. Recalling Banks’s observation, it is easy to see why, when the lessons discount their life experiences, students like RamilaU tend to be less enthusiastic about learning.

The disconnection between the curriculum and their experiences is an issue Dalit students continue to raise and debate. Pointing at a picture in her 5th grade Social Studies book (Figure 3.2), RishmaR asked me: “Wouldn’t it be so beautiful if the society that I live in is actually like the one that’s presented here? Everyone dancing together without boundaries?” Being a part of segregated neighborhood in rural Lalitpur, for RishmaR, a physical boundary exists between her community and the higher caste community. She can’t even walk freely in higher caste community, let alone hold hands and dance together with the members. In other words, Rishma’s social experience doesn’t match the easy co-
existences depicted in her Social Studies textbook. Suggesting that strong bonds and harmony among diverse groups are common in Nepal, the textbook fails to address the complexity and harmful effects of the caste system. As this process of under-and mis-representation continues year after year, eventually students become increasingly alienated as we see in the case of ManakU: “I willingly miss school because I am tired of it – tired of hearing only the negatives and not seeing a true reflection of my lived experience.”

Figure 3.2. “Hamro Bhasa Hamro Sanskriti” (Our Language, Our Culture)

The reflections of RishmaR and ManakU on their school experience signals the need to reform the curriculum content to make it more relevant and non-discriminatory towards Dalits. Unfortunately, the efforts to design a more inclusive curriculum has so far been limited to the “sprinkling” of few caste-related things to the curriculum. These include the visual representation of diversity (the image above is an example), and the fusion of caste
under a generic topic about respecting all humans. The first time the caste system explicitly occurs as a subject matter is in third grade. In a chapter devoted to the 20th century poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota, the Nepali book used at this level gives a biographical account of Devkota's contribution to the Nepali society as a writer. A brief description of Devkota's famous work “Muna Madan,” is included in this account along with the most famous lines in this poem: “People become great by heart not by caste” (Figure 3.3). Devkota was a poet who believed in the equality, and was against economic and caste-based discrimination. Thus, reading his biography can be very motivating to Dalit students. However, it worries me that the discussion of the caste system is situated in the context of a biography, and that it is very brief. The caste-system includes thousands of years of history and needs much in-depth study.

Figure 3.3. Excerpt from the Chapter Titled “Mahakabi (Great Poet) Devkota”

The biographical account of Devkota has been utilized in the curriculum for at least thirteen years, and the only recent change in terms of inclusion of Dalits in the curriculum appears to be the addition of one chapter in a Nepali book utilized in the ninth grade. The new edition of the book includes a chapter called ‘Manish Sabai Ekai Haun,’ which
translates as ‘All People Are One.’ Presented in the form of a dialogue between 3 students, the chapter emphasizes the importance of respecting people from all castes. Although brief, it touches upon why Dalits shouldn’t be treated as “untouchables,” and the importance of education as well as the change in people’s mindset to get rid of the caste system. At some point during the conversation, one of the characters asks the other character why he considers himself superior to Dalits, and why he supports untouchability, when he wears the clothes made by a Dalit brother, when he eats on the plate made by their Dalit peer’s father, and when he proudly wears shoes made by a Dalit uncle. Following the character’s comment, there are pictures representing the mentioned occupations of Dalits (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4. Excerpt from Chapter Titled “Mani Sabai Ekai Haun (All People are One) Source: MoES and DoE, “Manish Sabai Ekai Haun,” in Hamro Nepali (Bhaktapur: Nepal Curriculum Development Center, 2013), 61.

To get some student perspectives, I asked the ninth graders during their interviews about their thoughts on the chapter. In general, the students found it positive that the curriculum has started to incorporate issues surrounding caste. They were dissatisfied, however, with the fact that the topic is first broached in third grade but then not taken up
again until six years later: “After third grade, you wait all the way until the ninth grade to really talk about the caste system. And this is all you get. A much more detailed history, and experience of Dalits should be integrated into the curriculum. Right now, I still feel lost.” The student’s sense of loss arises from the superficial inclusion of caste system in the curriculum, when caste is such a huge part of his lived experience.

When it comes to curriculum reforms, Nepal still has a long stride to make. As recognized by the Nepal Curriculum Development Center itself, the challenges of putting the concept of ‘inclusive education’ into practice are numerous, in part because the concept is a relatively new one in Nepal. At the present stage, the “inclusive” curriculum in Nepal is at what Banks calls the “additive level.” At this level, improvements are typically limited to adding new content to already existing curricula without making any significant structural changes. The shortcoming of such sporadic addition of caste-related content is that the students don’t get a chance to engage deeply with the issue. In addition, the curriculum remains mainstream focused.

Another critical problem that Nepal’s education system faces is that its centralized national curriculum makes few provisions for flexibility and localization. Being forced to cover the provided curriculum content, and due to lack of time and support, educators find it challenging to incorporate local knowledge, history, language, and culture into the curriculum. This can be further disempowering for Dalit students: how can teachers effectively implement appropriate curriculum changes if they cannot embed the

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experiences of their students? Thus, there is a need for more responsive curricula that are individually and culturally appropriate for Dalit students.

To conclude, despite some efforts from the Nepal Curriculum Development Center to craft a culturally responsive curriculum, the existing curriculum and textbooks in Nepal, which are at “additive level,” continue to both under- and mis-represent marginalized groups. This disconnection between the home and school cultures negatively impacts the school experiences of Dalit students as they continue to lose motivation for learning, and feel alienated. Centralized curriculum further exacerbates the issue. Hence, the current curriculum continues to be problematic for Dalit students to participate in learning on an equal basis with their higher caste counterparts.

**Dalit Scholarship Programs**

Having realized the problem of access, enrollment, and retention typically faced by minority groups, the Ministry of Education launched several education reform programs in the 1990s. Working with governmental, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies, as discussed in Chapter One, these programs sought to increase the number of minority students and retain them in schools. One initiative, started in 1996, focused on providing scholarships to students from underrepresented groups. As the 2010 study by the Center for Educational Research and Social Development (CERSOD) revealed, the scholarship programs have minimized the cost of schooling for Dalit children, increased their enrollment, and reduced their dropout as well as repetition rates. For example, the

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average primary level dropout among the scholarship recipients from 7 districts utilized in the research revealed was found to be only 7%.\textsuperscript{162} The dropout rates at lower secondary and secondary were 3%, and 3.2% respectively, which are also very low.\textsuperscript{163} However, as studies have shown, certain recurring problems tend to reduce their effectiveness. These include the lack of a formal distribution mechanism, a high demand but a very limited number of scholarships, delayed distribution, corruption, and low relevancy of the scholarship criteria.\textsuperscript{164} For example, Hari P. Lamsal found that, a big issue regarding scholarships distribution among his research schools was the lack of communication between various stakeholders, such as the parents, and teachers prior to the selection of the scholarship recipients. \textsuperscript{165}

In my own research, these and similar issues were frequently mentioned by the students. The aim of this section is to give an account of the three main themes related to scholarships that consistently emerged during the interview: 1) the need for a more focused policy with clearer guidelines regarding the distribution of the scholarships; 2) the importance of teachers’ investment for the success of the scholarships; and 3) the need to re-think the scholarship criteria so that they correspond to the real economic status and academic performance of Dalit students.

The first issue concerns the role of government schools in terms of the implementation of the scholarship programs. Certain scholarship funds are allocated for each government school across all the regions of the country. School principals, teachers,
and School Management Committees (SMC) are responsible for selecting the recipients and distributing these scholarships.\textsuperscript{166} However, there is no formal mechanism to implement the scholarship programs at the school level.\textsuperscript{167} Thus, the scholarships are often distributed according to criteria created by individual schools rather than those set by the central government.\textsuperscript{168} While local flexibility is not in itself a problem, it has frequently led to miscommunication and delayed or irregular distribution of scholarships.\textsuperscript{169}

To provide an example in the context of my research, RamR and NirpeshR both attend the same school in Lalitpur, are Dalits, and come from financially challenged families. However, RamR has been a regular recipient of a government scholarship whereas NirpeshR “could never predict the year [he] would be awarded the scholarship.” This year NirpeshR is taking the national exam (SLC), and would really have benefitted from the scholarship: “I was very disheartened when I didn’t receive the scholarship from the school. Thank God that I was later awarded a scholarship of Rs. 1500 (~$15) from the Rotary club for my good performance in the 9\textsuperscript{th} grade final exam.\textsuperscript{170} At least I will be able to buy some practice books to better prepare for SLC.” This example suggests the lack of clarity and communication from the school concerning the distribution of the scholarships; it’s not clear why RamR receives his scholarship regularly, and NirpeshR doesn’t.

In looking at the research data from the six schools more closely, the rural schools in Sindhupalchok and Nawalparasi were found to have a more uniform distribution of the scholarships. In Sindhupalchok, all of the 10 students interviewed reported that the
\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{166} CERSOD, \textit{Study on Scholarship Management}, 39.  
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{169} Lamsal, “Understanding and Practices on Scholarship”; CERSOD, \textit{Study on Scholarship Management}.  
\textsuperscript{170} International agencies such as the Rotary Club, the UN, and the World Bank have created some scholarships for the Dalit students in Nepal.
\end{flushleft}
scholarships were offered to them regularly. The exceptional case was when the scholarship money had to be used for other purposes such as the construction or renovation of the school facilities. MayaR, for example, received scholarship in all other grades except in the 8th grade: “That year my scholarship was used to cover the cost of the construction of the new school building. So were the scholarships of other students. While I faced financial difficulty that year, I think it’s ok as the teachers didn’t have a choice.” The students in the school including MayaR were notified about the use of their scholarship funding during a school assembly. I believe that this clear communication from the teachers made MayaR comfortable about the use of her scholarship for the construction of school building.

In the school in rural Nawalparasi, students who were enrolled in the Nepali-medium section\(^\text{171}\) (7 out of 13) regularly received scholarships. None of the students reported that their scholarship funds were used for other purposes. On the other hand, students who were enrolled in the English-medium section had to pay some fees outside of their scholarships, but these were minimal compared to private school fees. BikashR explained his father’s motivation to transfer him to a public school: “It’s a lot cheaper than my private school and I still get to learn in English. In addition, my dad and the teachers here told me that that it’s easier for Dalit graduates of public schools to get scholarships for further education.” His father and teachers are correct that the government and organizations such as UNICEF give priority to the graduates of public schools for college scholarships.

\(^\text{171}\) Note that this is one of the two schools that offer two sections (the other one is urban Sindhupalchok). In one section, the medium of instruction is English. In the second section, Nepali language is the medium of instruction.
When asked to explain the reasons behind the regular distribution of the scholarship funds at their school in rural Nawalparasi, students like BikashR acknowledged the work of two of the teachers, one Dalit and one non-Dalit (Brahmin). According to the students, these teachers actively monitor the scholarship funds, inform students about the amount they are supposed to receive, and make sure that each student receives the scholarship on time. These teachers indicate the importance of internal coordination and close monitoring of the scholarship programs in order to reach the targeted goal and the targeted population.

Further analysis of the comments made by the students suggested that they are more interested in receiving need-based and merit-based scholarships rather than funding under quotas for Dalit or other disadvantaged students. SujanR said, “We receive scholarships for being Dalits, not because of our economic situation or our academic performance. I don’t know if this is right.” Another student RoshanR was even more vocal about the problem:

Scholarship based on the castes makes my peers and community members more aware of the existing upper and lower caste divisions. It gives a wrong impression that all Dalits need to be helped. My father doesn’t allow me to take the scholarship because he says that it’s demeaning. And I agree with him. It’s just another way of forcefully reminding us that we are Dalits.

The comments made by SujanR and RoshanR suggest that the distribution of the scholarships solely based on caste is against the spirit of social justice and it is further intensifying the existing caste division in society. The problem isn’t with the objective of the scholarship programs, which is to promote social inclusion in the education system by ensuring educational parity for disadvantaged Dalit communities.\textsuperscript{172} The problem is the

\textsuperscript{172} CERSOD, \textit{Study on Scholarship Management}, 22.
approach that the system seems to favor: the Dalit students are entitled to the scholarship because of their caste and receive scholarship regardless of their economic situation and academic performance. The result is that all Dalit students, whether rich or poor, whether low performing or successful, get the same amount of funding.

Many Dalit recipients thus believe the scholarship program is not properly distributed and utilized. PrabhaU argued that the scholarship isn’t ethically just because students who come from economically challenged background like her get the same scholarship as her peers from a more well-off family. Another student, RamR, believes that the scholarship could be distributed in a better way: “The amount of scholarship we get is inadequate. Scholarship amounts designated for well-off students could be re-distributed to increase our scholarship amount. That way our minimum school expenses could be met.”

Some of the principals and teachers that I spoke to as a part of my research project also expressed their dissatisfaction over the existing scholarship programs. They stated that the scholarship criteria could be strengthened to better support both Dalit and non-Dalit students facing financial challenges. In line with these comments, studies conducted by Lamsal in 2009 and by the Center for Educational Research and Social Development (CERSOD) in 2010 on the implementation and effectiveness of the scholarship programs concluded that the program isn’t necessarily reaching the students who are in the greatest need.173

Some students (17 out of 61) raised concerns that the same amount of funding is awarded to both low performing and more successful students. GitaU’s comments capture

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173 Lamsal, “Understanding and Practices on Scholarship”; CERSOD, Study on Scholarship Management.
this concern: “I would prefer to get a merit-based scholarship rather than one for being a Dalit. That way my efforts would be recognized and the scholarship I receive would be considered legitimate. It’s not fair that I work so hard and get the same scholarship as someone who doesn’t put that much effort.” Another student, RitaR, adds, “It’s great that we have these scholarships. But the balance isn’t there. Instead of encouraging low performing students to work hard, it kills their motivation because they are going to get the scholarship anyway.” These comments highlight the perceived need for more appropriate targeting of the scholarship program. As the study conducted by CERSOD found, need-based and merit-based scholarships appear to be more effective than scholarships based solely on caste.

In conclusion, my research revealed that the Dalit students from across different regions and from both rural and urban settings agree with the scholarly findings that effective mechanisms for the management, monitoring, and distribution of the scholarship programs in schools are needed in order to better reach the targeted population. Furthermore, the research reinforced that the scholarship programs should correspond to the real economic status and academic performance of the Dalit students rather than issuing scholarships based on the caste.

**Relationship with the Peers**

*What is really important to me is that my non-Dalit friends don’t hesitate to eat out of the same plate as I do. Caste isn’t a barrier in our friendship! This is why I love coming to school.* – PrabhaU, Urban Nawalparasi

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908 -1970), who is best known for creating ‘Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 3.5),’ stated that people focus on addressing
higher levels of needs only after they have fulfilled certain basic needs.\textsuperscript{174} One of those basic needs he identified was ‘Love and Belongingness,’ which is met through satisfactory relationships.\textsuperscript{175} Satisfactory relationships imply acceptance by others. This theory is especially helpful in understanding the impact of peer relationships on academic performance of students. Students’ acceptance among peers is related with successful academic performance, whereas rejected and low level of acceptance is related to academic difficulties.\textsuperscript{176} In other words, students can only focus fully on their academic performance – higher level need, after meeting the basic need of love and belongingness among peers.


\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.

Figure 3.5. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs


Drawing upon Maslow’s theory, the central point I want to make in this section is that, the quality of interactions between Dalits and their peers influence Dalit children’s school experience. In doing so, first, I will briefly discuss the findings of previous studies concerning Dalit students’ relationship with their non-Dalit peers. Then, I will move into my research finding by presenting the rural vs. urban caste distribution of the “friends” of the interviewed Dalit students in all three districts. Finally, I will discuss the degree in which the neighborhood housing pattern impacts the amount and quality of interactions, consequently, creating different experiences for Dalit students.

Previous Dalit studies have established a link between Dalit students’ relationships with their peers and the academic performance of Dalit students: the
rejection and low level of acceptance experienced by Dalit students from their non-Dalit peers was consistently found to be related to the dropout of Dalit students from schools.\(^{177}\) According to these studies, negative interactions between Dalit students and their non-Dalit peers manifests in several ways, such as, addressing Dalit students by terms associated with their caste (\textit{damai, kami, sarki})\(^{178}\) instead of their actual names, Dalit students not being allowed by non-Dalit students to sit together in class, and Dalit students not supported by their peers in learning process (e.g. classroom discussion, homework).\(^{179}\) These practices discourage Dalit students from attending schools. As we will see later in the section, such practices are still prevalent in some of the schools included in my research as well. A limitation of the previous studies is that they don’t provide an analysis on the influence of neighborhood housing patterns on the amount and quality of interactions between Dalit students and their peers. Thus, this section adds to the current research by providing an analysis of this missing piece of the puzzle.

In talking to the Dalit students from the three districts about the caste distribution of their friends, I found that, apart from the rural school in Lalitpur, the vast majority (over 80\%) of them had non-Dalit friends (see Figure 3.6). These non-Dalit friends not only belonged to \textit{Vaishya} caste but also to the higher castes such as \textit{Brahmin} and \textit{Chhetri}. This suggests a wider acceptance and interactions of the Dalit students with non-Dalit peers in today’s schools, which has been noted in previous studies.\(^{180}\) Commenting on the changing situation, MeetaR said, “It's great to have non-Dalit friends. They see me beyond my caste.


\(^{178}\) \textit{Damai, Kami} and \textit{Sarki} all fall under Dalits. As mentioned earlier, if Dalits are addressed by these words rather than their names, they find it offensive.

\(^{179}\) IIDS, \textit{A Study on Nepal}, 129-30.

When my father was in school, he wasn’t even allowed to sit next to his non-Dalit peers in class.”

![Figure 3.6. Rural/Urban Caste Distribution of Dalit Students’ Friends in the Three Districts](image)

Source: Created by author using the research data.

Further analysis of the interview data led to an interesting finding: Dalit students who belonged to mixed neighborhoods had more positive relationships with their peers than those from the segregated neighborhoods. Firstly, over 84% of the Dalit students in mixed neighborhoods had non-Dalit friends. Secondly, only three of these Dalit students reported incidents of negative verbal or physical interactions with their peers; the remaining students spoke highly of their relationships with their peers.

For example, PrabhaU, a student from urban Nawalparasi, radiated a feeling of deep satisfaction as she explained to me how she spends her lunchtime with her group of friends, both Dalits and non-Dalits. She said,

> Everyday my friends and I plan the menu for the next day’s lunch. Then we divide up the ingredients among ourselves. During the lunchtime, all of us gather in the school ground and make our lunch together. It’s great fun! And what is really
important to me is that my non-Dalit friends don’t hesitate to eat out of the same plate as I do. Caste isn’t a barrier in our friendship! This is why I love coming to school.

For PrabhaU, being able to eat together with friends is an indication of acceptance and belongingness among her group. This positive relationship with her group means a lot to her: it excites her, and provides her motivation to attend school. Each of the other nine Dalit students I interviewed from her school anchored the same enthusiasm and satisfaction while discussing their relationship with their peers.

The result in rural Nawalparasi, where majority of the Dalit students lived in mixed neighborhoods, was parallel to that of urban Nawalparasi. All of the thirteen Dalit students I interviewed from this school affirmed the prevalence of positive relationships between students of different castes at their school. One student, SujanR describes his experience: “I have both Dalit and non-Dalit friends in my circle. I cannot imagine being at school without them. They make my school life enjoyable. And my non-Dalit friends are the most progressive people I have met.” When I asked him to explain what makes his non-Dalit friends “progressive,” SujanR explained that his friends not only sit together with him in class, but also share lunch, and even clothes. In other words, a comfortable space fashioned by his peers’ positive attitudes and acceptance has created a phenomenal school experience for SujanR. His relationship with non-Dalit peers outside of his friend circle is equally positive: “What I like about this school is that everyone respects each other. I have never been teased because of my caste.” Another student, RameshR, who has only Dalit friends, agrees with SujanR that as a Dalit student, he feels safe and respected among the peers: “It just happened that my close circle of friends are only Dalits. But all of my peers are respectful. No one makes fun of my caste and I am very happy about that.”
The comments made by these three students, PrabhaU, RameshR, and, SujanR show how important it is for the Dalit students to feel accepted and respected by their non-Dalit peers. According to Maslow’s theory, it can be concluded that a positive relationship with the peers would not only enhance the Dalit students’ self-esteem and self-worth, it would motivate them to attend school regularly. The benefit of mixed neighborhoods is also reflected in the positive relationships among the Dalit students and their peers in urban Lalitpur and urban Sindhupalchok. The Dalit students in these areas felt more welcomed among their peers than those students who belonged to the rural areas of these districts, where segregated communities were maintained.

Starting with Sindhupalchok district, the caste distribution of “friends” of the Dalit students I interviewed show that 100% of the students in both urban and rural Sindhupalchok have non-Dalit peers (see Figure 3.6). However, the Dalit students from the rural school felt more alienated from their non-Dalit peers than the Dalit students from the urban school. In urban Sindhupalchok, majority of the Dalit students said that they were happy about their relationships with both Dalit and non-Dalit peers. Apart from one student, all of the other eight Dalit students in urban Sindhupalchok stated that they never had issues with their peers because of their caste.

Unfortunately, not all of the Dalit students can have positive relationships with their peers; their caste affiliation gets on the way of their relationships. In rural Sindhupalchok, 8 of the 10 students mentioned that their relationships with some non-Dalit peers, outside of those belonging to their friendship circle, were not very positive. UpamaR told me that one of her non-Dalit peers showed her the wrong process when UpamaR asked for help on her math homework. Another student, RoshanR, claimed that one of his non-Dalit peers
tore his notebook. When I asked him for the reason, he responded, “I don’t know why. I guess it’s a part of the abuse. I don’t even like reporting to the teachers because they will blame me instead.” In addition to being vulnerable among his peers because of his caste status, RoshanR faces the challenge of not being able to report any negative interactions to the teachers. This is a serious concern as the lack of intervention from school officials such as the teachers could further increase RoshanR’s vulnerability.

In rural Lalitpur, the situation was similar to that of rural Sindhupalchok: eight out of the ten Dalit students I interviewed told me that they have been victims of verbal abuse. It was particularly distressing to hear RijaR’s story. With frustration, she said:

Some of my non-Dalit peers look down on me because I am a Dalit. Some even compare us to the animals. I remember one day, one of my classmates, who is a Chhetri, shouted, ‘The faces of the Dalits resemble to a dog or a monkey.’ He said that in front of the whole class and I felt awful. It’s sad that even in the twenty first century, Dalits have to deal with such things!

RijaR was one of the four students who mentioned that verbal abuse by non-Dalit peers included the use of the word dog to address them. Three of those four students, including RijaR, have only Dalit friends in their group. Thus, it appears that even the students who do have non-Dalit friends become the victims of verbal abuse. Unlike the most students from mixed communities, who felt that everyone respected each other, a majority (8 out of 10) of the rural Lalitpur students stated that they didn’t feel fully safe and respected among some of their peers. However, the students did mention that after two of the Teach for Nepal fellows joined their school, the frequency of negative verbal interactions has decreased. The students believe that the active participation of the two teachers in bringing forward the often-unheard stories of the Dalits, who have made invaluable contributions to the society, has made some impact. According to MitaR, these
stories “have made both the Dalit and non-Dalit students realize that the word success also exists in a Dalit’s dictionary.” She further added, “I am happy to see that the message of love and respect from these teachers have positively changed the school environment. Some of my non-Dalit peers have stopped abusing us.”

In urban Lalitpur, AnujU was the only student to mention the case of negative verbal and physical interactions with a non-Dalit peer. With a long sigh, he said, “One of my non-Dalit peers often calls me damai rather than addressing me by my name.” When asked whether he has approached his teacher about the issue, he said, “I cannot do that. It doesn’t help. He is going to hit me if I tell the teacher.” AnujU’s comment raises a serious question about the emotional and physical safety of the Dalit students at the school. Based on ‘Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 3.5),’ until the Dalit students like AnujU feel that the safety and security needs are met in school, their fear and anxiety will be high and their school experience will be negatively affected.

Adding to the already complex issue were the reported cases of two Dalit students in urban Lalitpur being teased by another Dalit student. Two of the interviewees, GitaU and ArjanU, both mentioned a mutual Dalit classmate of theirs, who told both of them that she was higher in the caste hierarchy and gets more respect. “It’s more painful when another Dalit person tells me that I have a lower position in society.” said GitaU. This, however, isn’t that surprising. As mentioned in chapter 1, the Dalit community is further divided into sub-groups leading to various rankings within the group. This ranking is still used in many parts of the country to justify the superiority of one Dalit group over another.

Thus, consistent with Maslow’s theory, the data derived from the three districts utilized in the research suggest that the feeling of acceptance, respect, and safety among the
peers positively affect the school experience of the Dalit students. At the same time, in agreement with other scholarly findings, my research found that indirect forms of discrimination, such as negative verbal and physical interactions still exist in some schools. The type of the housing patterns in the neighborhood further adds to the complexity: the amount and quality of interactions between Dalit students and their peers are directly impacted by the degree to which neighborhoods are segregated or mixed. So, it’s clear that not every Dalit student can call his/her school a ‘safe haven’ for learning.

**Summary**

This chapter has focused on the kinds of school-related factors have a significant impact on the degree to which Dalit students find their school experience meaningful. Five factors emerged as being especially powerful determinants of Dalit students’ school experience: i) Caste of Teachers, ii) Teachers’ Expectations, iii) School Curriculum, iv) Dalit Scholarship Programs, and v) Relationship with Peers. First, the access to teachers from their own caste positively impacts Dalit students’ school experience, both as role models and through their ability to relate to Dalit students (culturally competent higher caste teachers can, in similar ways, also create positive learning environments for Dalit students). Second, the school experience of Dalit students is impacted by the expectations that their teachers hold for them. Analysis of the interview data suggested that Dalit students from segregated neighborhoods often felt that their higher-caste teachers had low expectations of their educational abilities. According to the students, this was conveyed through physical separation and negative comments from the higher-caste teachers. By contrast, highly effective teachers held higher expectations for Dalit students and created
enriching learning environments through “authentic” interactions. Third, the lack of inclusiveness in the existing curriculum in Nepal was found to be detrimental to the school experience of Dalit students. Despite some efforts, Nepal’s curriculum does not sufficiently represent or engage Dalits’ lived experience and it has been left to individual teachers to find ways to incorporate their cultures and stories into their lesson plans. Consistent with the findings of previous scholarly work, my research also found that the lack of formal distribution mechanisms in the Dalit Scholarship Programs has resulted in delays and corruption. Moreover, analysis of the interview data suggested that Dalit students feel that the current scholarship criteria reinforce their low caste status, and hence the students were more interested in need-based and merit-based scholarships. Once again, however, some teachers have found ways to mitigate these problems by overseeing the application and decision process and communicating with the students about how scholarships worked. Finally, it was found that positive relationships with one’s peers significantly improve the school experience for Dalit students. Unfortunately, some Dalit students still feel emotionally and physically unsafe in schools due to negative interactions with their peers. The housing patterns in neighborhoods play a key role in the amount and quality of interactions, with Dalit students from mixed neighborhoods having a more positive experience.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined the impact of and relationship among several factors that shape the school experiences of Nepali Dalit students. I also addressed possible gaps in the existing research on the school experience of Dalits by taking into account the heterogeneity among Dalits. To this end, I chose to interview Dalit students from various geographical regions with different levels of socio-economic status. Informed by current educational theory as well as recent studies focused on Nepal, my analysis showed that, in particular, three social context factors (Family Educational Background, Economic Status, and Neighborhood Effects) and five distinct school-related factors (Caste of Teachers, Teachers’ Expectations, School Curriculum, Dalit Scholarship Programs, and Relationship with Peers) all significantly affect Dalit students’ school experiences. Moreover, I discovered that these factors do not operate in isolation but that, in fact, they interact in powerful ways to shape and influence the school experiences of Dalit students.

Delving deeper into the impact of these factors, I found that Dalit students with educated family members tend to have positive perceptions of school, be well motivated, and have higher expectations. Differences in economic status typically affect perceptions of school, investments in English language instruction, as well as access to educational resources (e.g. paid tutors) and the amount of time set aside for study. As a result, high-income Dalit students can overcome many of the disadvantages associated with low parental education and caste status.

Because they do not take into account differences in economic status and academic performance, Dalit Scholarship Programs, a major reform by the Nepali government, have
failed to effectively benefit the students. The criteria for recipients need to be revisited so that Dalit students can truly embrace the scholarships rather than seeing them as “caste tags.” Additionally, since the programs are trapped under ineffective management, monitoring, and distribution systems, they now need a major uplift.

The differences in housing patterns between rural and urban areas, and between different geographic regions, also influence the school experience of Dalit students. Mixed neighborhoods, particularly in urban areas, expose Dalit students to a larger pool of potential role models who can provide motivation and a sense of possibilities. Dalit students from segregated communities, typically rural areas, face greater alienation and disconnection from the higher-castes.

This is an important issue since the general lack of Dalit representation among school teachers makes it is difficult for Dalit students to find role models in school and decreases their ability-to-relate to the teachers. While some culturally competent higher-caste teachers are capable of creating environments conducive to learning, most lack the ability to teach in culturally responsive and sensitive ways. Moreover, the higher-caste teachers — who typically come from segregated neighborhoods where communication between different castes is constrained — tend to have low expectations of Dalit children. Conveyed through physical separation and negative comments in class, their caste-based prejudice is both discouraging and upsetting for Dalit students.

This last problem is exacerbated by the fact that the existing curriculum also generates feelings of alienation and exclusion among Dalit students. It is left to individual teachers to provide a more inclusive set of lessons and learning materials to compensate for the lack of Dalit representation in the official textbooks. Furthermore, the amount and
quality of peer interactions Dalit students have at school affects their sense of safety, trust, and belonging. While positive peer relationships are significant for constructive school experiences for Dalit students, many continue to be affected with negative verbal and physical interactions with their peers. It is important to note here that the Dalit students who struggle the most with peer interactions are typically from segregated neighborhoods.

Nineteen years down the road, as my thesis has shown, Koirala’s 1996 observation that caste is at the center of people’s conversations about themselves and their experiences at school still holds. Regrettably, Dalit students’ lower caste identity continues to frame their school experience. By focusing on the variety of mediating factors, however, this thesis has sought to emphasize and map the heterogeneity of Dalit student experiences with the hope that overlooked issues regarding Dalit education would receive attention. Ultimately, my research shows that policies designed to improve and increase the educational opportunities for Dalits must, in order to be effective, form part of a broader initiative to identify and address the ways in which multiple factors come together to shape their school experiences. In other words, rather than concentrating all efforts on a single issue, policies and reforms must pay attention to the web of decisive factors, such as low parental education, segregation in neighborhoods, lack of Dalit representation among school teachers, lack of cultural competence in higher-caste teachers, issues in the curriculum, and social relationships of Dalit students. Only by tackling the combined impact of these issues will it be possible to create a meaningful school experience for Dalit students – one where their full potential can be realized and nurtured so that they, too, can become future college graduates and successful leaders in the country.
Although my thesis has addressed the existing gap in Dalit literature by capturing the ways in which various factors powerfully shape and influence the school experience of Dalit students, my own work has its limitations. While I attempted to diversify my research subject by choosing three districts, each one from a different geographical region, and by selecting both urban and rural schools within those districts, my data do not fully capture the diversity in the Nepali Dalit population.

Additionally, the sole focus on Dalit students meant that I was unable to have a comparison group. Similar study including the perspectives of higher-caste students as well can, in fact, help us better understand the school experiences of Dalit students. Since gender plays a key role in shaping the school experiences for Nepali children, I believe that looking at the issue from gendered perspective can also provide some new insights.

In this sense, my research is only a small contribution to what will hopefully become a larger movement working to improve the quality of Dalit education. One specific area where future research is needed is the growing conversion of Dalits into Christianity and the effects of this new religious identity on their school experiences. A 2005 study conducted by the International Labor Organization in Nepal pointed out that many Dalits in Nepal have embraced Christianity as a part of their search for a life with dignity.181 Thousands of Dalits have and continue to convert to Christianity to escape from caste-based discrimination. In fact, in its 2013 report, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity identified Nepal as the country with the highest percentage of annual growth rate of Christianity in the world with 10.93%, and suggested that the primary reason for

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the growth is religious conversion.\textsuperscript{182} To what extent is this conversion a successful strategy? I.e. how likely is that someone from a higher caste would suddenly change their behavior towards a Dalit because they are no longer Hindus? During one of the interviews, a Christian student, ManakU said to me, “Sister I am a Christian. My parents converted to Christianity before was born. But I am still considered a Dalit. Not only this, my Hindu neighbors and peers laugh at me saying, ‘In your religion, people eat cow.’ I don’t eat cow. Why don’t people understand this?”\textsuperscript{183} Is ManakU’s comment a typical response? If so, it seems that the conversion to Christianity remains a fantasy for a life with dignity. Or are there other obvious advantages that are pulling in Dalits to Christianity? I remain curious as to how this religious sweep affects the landscape of Dalit students’ school experiences.

Another avenue of research would be to examine the experiences of Dalit students who have had the opportunity to live in hostels, which embrace caste co-existence. Budhanilkantha School in Kathmandu is a prominent example of such a community, where numbers replace students’ surnames, and students from different castes room, eat, and study together. How does this living experience, one that is different from their home community, shape and influence Dalit students’ school experiences? When they return home during vacations, the numbering system is no longer valid and their caste identity once again becomes a significant factor. How, then, do those Dalit students cope with and understand the constant switch between their number and caste identities? A friend of mine, who attended the school, put it this way: “At Budhanilkantha, no one cared about my

\textsuperscript{183} In Hinduism, cow is considered a sacred animal. Thus, eating beef is considered immoral.
caste and I could focus all my attention to my studies. But when I would go back home, the reality would resurface again. And I would feel terrible. One thing that Budhanilkantha did teach me though, is to challenge people’s mindset about Dalits, by believing in ourselves and our abilities, as well as to speak against discrimination.” Even though replacing surnames by numbers is not a practical solution for a larger society, Budhanilkantha seems to provide a great educational experience for its Dalit students. And perhaps these students will become advocates for change. Thus, further research on hostel experiences of Dalit students should provide interesting insights on the issue.

Future research could also productively engage the work of scholars in fields such as postcolonial and critical race studies. Examination of this work was very fruitful for my thesis as it led to interesting insights, forced me to look at Dalit experience from multiple angles, and helped me to see interesting parallels. For example, reading in the field of critical race studies provided insights into the similarities and differences between the experiences of Dalits and the experiences of other marginalized groups. Thus, I believe that situating Dalits in a broader context is important, as it can enhance and provide new directions in the efforts to better understand and improve the quality of Dalit education.
Appendix

1. Questions for Individual Interview

All interviews were conducted in Nepali. Oral consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. In general, I asked relevant questions from the list (every question on the list wasn’t utilized), and, depending on their backgrounds, I sometimes made specific inquiries as well. Also, some of these questions emerged as a result of the conversation with the participants. I acknowledge that many of these questions are very personal, but in Nepal’s context, such questions are commonly asked and are not new to my participants. So, I thought that these questions were appropriate for my research as well. However, participants were not forced to answer in any case, and had the option to skip the questions that they didn’t want to answer.

General Background Information:
- How old are you?
- What Dalit caste do you belong to?
- In which grade are you studying now?
- What is your class rank (or roll number)? [Each student is assigned a number that indicates his/her level of academic performance in the final exam of the preceding grade.]

Family/Home Information:
- Did your parents go to school? Up to what level?
- Did any other members of your family go to school?
- How many siblings do you have? What do they do?
- What type of professions are your parents involved in?
- How is the economic situation?

Participants’ Academic Background/Perceptions:
- How is your current academic performance in school? Are you happy with it?
- Do you have a particular grade that you want to achieve? Do you think you can make it?
- How often do you come to school? Have you missed any school days? If so, what was the reason?
- Do you stay at school the entire time? If not, when do you leave and why?
- Have you failed any exams? How did your family members react to that?

Neighborhood Characteristics
- Do you live in a mixed neighborhood or is it primarily a Dalit settlement?
- What is your perception of the neighborhood that you live in?
- How is your interaction with your neighbors?

School Characteristics:
In which part of the district is your school located? How long do you have to walk to get there?
What do you like most about your school?
What are the things that you don’t like about school?
What do you think could be done to make your school experience more positive?

Issues in Dalit Scholarship Distribution/Criteria, School Curriculum emerged as a result of these questions. And I made specific inquiries as a follow up to the students’ comments.

Relationship with Teachers:
- How do your teachers treat you?
- Are there any Dalit teachers in your school?
- Do you think your status as a lower caste (Dalit) affects the views teachers have about you?
- Do you have any favorite teacher? Why do you like him/her?

Peers Relationships:
- How many friends do you have in your class and school? What caste do they belong to?
- Where and with whom do you usually sit in the class? Why?
- Do you think your status as a lower caste (Dalit) affects the views that your friends have about you? How, example.

Role Models/Future Aspirations:
- Is there someone in your school, at home or in your neighborhood you look up to/are inspired by? Why?
- What level of education do you want to pursue? Do you think it’s possible?
- What do you want to become in the future? Do you think you can achieve your dreams?

Closure of the interview:
- Do you want to share anything else with me?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Subject: [IRB] Notice of Protocol Approval
Date: Wednesday, March 26, 2014 4:52:38 PM Eastern Daylight Time
From: IRB ADMINISTRATOR
To: David Malone, Ph.D., Laxmi Rajak
CC: Lorna Hicks

Protocol: [C0218] Examination of Lower Caste Students' Perceptions about School in Nepal

Researcher(s):
Laxmi Rajak (Undergraduate Student Researcher)
David Malone (Advisor)

Expiration Date: 3/25/2015

In conducting research under this protocol, the researcher agrees to:

- Secure approval before making any changes to the protocol, such as adding another subject population, revising procedures, modifying the informed consent process, or replacing or adding investigators.

  The form, Request to Amend an Approved Protocol, can be found at:
  http://www.ors.duke.edu/Research-with-Human-Subjects/forms

- Renew the protocol within twelve months.

  The form, Request to Renew an Approved Protocol, can be found at:
  http://www.ors.duke.edu/Research-with-Human-Subjects/forms

- Report any unanticipated risks to the research subjects or deviations from the procedures described in the protocol as soon as they are identified. Report to Lorna Hicks at lorna.hicks@duke.edu

- Notify the IRB staff at ors-info@duke.edu when the research is completed.

- As required by Duke policy, retain all research data and signed consent forms for at least five years after the completion of the study.
3. IRB Renewal Approval (Limited to the Analysis of the Data Collected)

Protocol : [C0218] Examination of Lower Caste Students' Perceptions about School in Nepal

Researcher(s) :  
David Malone(Advisor)  
Laxmi Rajak(Undergraduate Student Researcher)

Expiration Date : 3/24/2016

Your request to renew an approved protocol has been approved.

As described in your original notice of Protocol Approval, researchers agree to:

• Secure approval before making any changes to the protocol, such as adding another subject population, revising procedures, modifying the informed consent process, or replacing or adding investigators.

  The form, Request to Amend an Approved Protocol, can be found at:  
  http://www.ors.duke.edu/Research-with-Human-Subjects/forms

• Renew the protocol within twelve months.

  The form, Request to Renew an Approved Protocol, can be found at:  
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• Report any unanticipated risks to the research subjects or deviations from the procedures described in the protocol as soon as they are identified. Report to Lorna Hicks at lorna.hicks@duke.edu.

• Notify the IRB staff at ors-info@duke.edu when the research is completed.
Bibliography


Grolnick, Wendy S. and Maria L. Slowiaczek. “Parents’ Involvement in Children’s Schooling: A Multidimensional Conceptualization and Motivational Model.” *Child Development*


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