



The Learning Performance of Indigenous Students in Nepali Private Schools: A Mixed-Methods Study

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One of the primary goals of schools is to improve the students' learning performance. Considering the factors associated to students' indigeneity contributing to their learning performances, this study explored the learning performances of 'indigenous' (Janajati) students in Nepali private secondary schools. Grounded in Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory, the investigation employed a two-staged mixed-methods research process. In the first phase, longitudinal data (grade XII exam results) of 770 students between 2015 and 2019 at a case study school in Kathmandu were obtained and analysed. The quantitative results yielded from the descriptive analyses revealed that Janajati students, namely the Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu students included in the study, had a lower academic performance as compared to their non-Janajati counterparts. These results are consonant with overall national patterns in Nepal. In an attempt to explain these differences, a sequential qualitative study was undertaken through in-depth interviews with five participants (three students and two teachers affiliated to the case study school from the same indigenous groups). For analytical purposes, factors influencing students' performance were grouped into home-related and school-related themes. The study showed that home-related factors were more prevalent than the school-related factors in the students with lower learning performances. While family economic backgrounds and parental education also had a role to play, cultural factors (such as relative lack of predisposition towards education and aspiration for different occupations) were the most important factors influencing lower learning performance.

Keywords: learning performance, indigenous (Janajati) students, education, schools

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INTRODUCTION

One of the primary goals of schools is to improve the students' learning performance, which is taken as one of the criteria for assessing the schools' effectiveness (Nahavandi, 2015). Learning performance is determined by several factors, such as social positions, home or school environment, and personal factors (Fernandez-Malpartida, 2021; Tran & Phan Tran, 2021). Olufemi et al. (2018), Sherman et al. (2008) and other researchers have examined several factors associated with the students' learning performance such as student-related factors (personal causal factors), parents-related factors (family causal factors), teacher-related factors (academic causal factors), and school-related factors. Some past studies have glossed these factors differently and identified for example, gender, age, caste/ethnicity/race, intelligence, creativity, attitude, and motivation level as determinants of students' learning performance (Panes & Falle, 2021; Parajuli & Thapa, 2017; Amedu, 2015; Szell, 2013; Fletcher & Tienda, 2010; Hallinan, 1998). Social positions, defined as the endowment of three forms of capital, namely, economic, social, and cultural capital, is argued to have an impact on educational activities and students' learning performance (Pinxten & Lievens, 2014; Bandura, 1997; Bourdieu, 1970).

There are several key theoretical concepts to consider, including habitus, practice, field, and various forms of capital such as cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital as propounded by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Gender, class, ethnicity, culture, education, and the history all influence an individual's habitus and practice. Bourdieu (1986) particularly distinguishes three types of capital: economic, social, and cultural capital, which are regarded as determinants of the learners' social position. Similarly, cultural capital is assumed to predispose learners towards certain activities and behaviours, resulting in the formation of a habitus (Andersson, 2021; Bandura, 1997; Bourdieu, 1986).

In the context of Nepal, indigeneity (or ethnicity) as a social position is one of the major aspects that has not received sufficient attention in the study of students' school level performances. Employing the cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), this paper studies secondary level students, focusing on their indigeneity as a social construct in order to explain their learning performance. A mixed-methods research approach was applied where quantitative research was used to establish the students' learning performance by ethnicity, followed by a complementary qualitative research, which sought to explain the pattern. Specifically, this study examined learning performance of the students from the indigenous ethnic background, who are collectively known as Janajati in Nepal. Among the Janajati, students represented in this study include Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu. Their XII exam grades are taken as the proxies of their learning performances and are compared against their counterparts representing the non-Janajati groups primarily made of the Brahmans and Chhetris from the Khas-Arya macro category. Janajati people are one-third of Nepal's population (CBS, 2011). Students from this macro category of Nepal's population are persistently found to have low learning performance as compared to the so-called 'high-caste' Khas-Arya. Khas-Arya groups are from Indo-European language group and speak Sanskrit-based (*Khas Nepali*) languages. Whereas, majority of Janajati people are of Mongoloid stock and are

composed of, among others, Sherpa, Tamang, Magar, Rai, Limbu, Gurung and Thakali. They primarily speak Tibeto-Burman languages (Subedi, 2010; Bennett et al., 2008).

Several previous studies such as Devkota et al. (2020), ERO (2013, 2015, 2016, 2019), and Mathema and Bista (2006) have raised pertinent issues regarding differentiated academic status in Nepali schools by caste and ethnicities. They have revealed persisting low academic performances of the students from the Janajati background as compared to the students from the 'dominant' Brahman and Chhetri caste groups. Applying a mixed-methods research process, the quantitative part of the current study attempted to test this hypothesis: "There was a significant difference in students' learning performance between the non-Janajati (only Brahman and Chhetri are taken as reference groups in this study) and Janajati students (only Sherpa, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rai and Limbu students are taken in this study)". The qualitative part sought to explain the phenomenon by answering the research questions: how do the participating students and teachers from the *Indigenous* background experience, and perceive the school and home-related factors with reference to their ethnicity, affecting their performances? It is assumed that the findings of the study are important for the nuanced understanding of the context with greater implications for educational policies and practices in Nepal. We believe that the exploration of the learning environment surrounding the students is important and would help reduce stereotypes associated with the students from Janajati groups.

Status of Caste and Ethnicity in Nepal

Nepal is a country of diversity in terms of castes, ethnicities, culture, religions, languages, and ecological zones (Delprato, 2021). According to 2011 Census (CBS 2011), 125 different castes/ethnic groups speaking 123 languages reside across the country. About fifty per cent of the total population in Nepal reside in the Hill and Mountain regions, and the rest live in the southern plain known as the Tarai region. Like India, Nepal has a caste system but it does not neatly fit into the four-fold *Varna* model that is found in India (Gellner & Adhikari, 2019, p. 141). The first civil code of the country, known as Muluki Ain, promulgated in 1854, divided the population into three broad categories ordered in a continuum based on the purity-pollution dichotomy. The sacred thread bearers (*Tagadhari*) were placed at the top of the hierarchy, and the so-called untouchables at the bottom. The Janajati ethnic groups (then known as tribal groups), who did not otherwise belong to the caste system, were slotted in between as the alcohol drinkers (*Matawali*), and were still regarded higher castes. They were further divided into enslavables and non-enslaveables. The so-called untouchable category too was divided into touchable and water unacceptable, and untouchable and water unacceptable.

Of the Janajati groups, 59 are now recognised as the indigenous peoples, and are affiliated to the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NIFIN) formed in 1993 (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016). Nepal outlawed the caste-based discrimination in 1963, but it took a long time to be functionally enshrined into effective laws against caste-based untouchability and discriminations. There has been disproportionate representation of the 'high-castes' groups, particularly Brahmans, Chhetris and Newars (Newars: a caste community included in the Janajati groups) in the establishment, including politics,

government, and public services. Conversely, the Janajati groups in general and Dalits in particular have experienced marginalization to various extents. In order to redress this unbalance, Nepal started reservation policy in 2007, which now has been expanded to legislatures, public services, and university studies. For the purpose of distributive social justice, the Constitution of Nepal 2015 has divided Nepal's population into five macro-categories with new labels: Khas-Arya (previous *Tagadharis*), Adivasi-Janajati (previous tribes, indigenous peoples), Madhesi (dwellers of Nepal's Tarai), Dalits (previous untouchables) and others including the Muslims (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016).

For the purpose of this research, we use the Janajati (indigenous) and non-Janajati terms. This study takes Brahman and Chhetri groups belonging to the Khas-Arya macro category as the reference group and refer them to as the non-Janajati group. The census 2011 shows that about a third (32.04%) of Nepal's population belong to the Khas-Arya group. Similarly, over a third (34.97%) of the Nepal population is occupied by the Janajati groups. The major Janajati ethnic groups include Magar (7%), Tharu (6.56%), Tamang (5.81%), Newar (4.99%), Rai (2.34%), Gurung (1.97%), and Limbu (1.46%). The students included in the study come from major Janajati groups, which make up over half of the total Janajati population.

The literacy rate among these groups is also differentiated. The so-called high-caste Brahman and Chhetri groups have one of the highest literacy rates. According, CBS (2011), Nepal's average literacy rate (five years and above) stands at 65.9%. More than 70% people belonging to the Hill Brahman, Chhetri, and Madhesi Brahman and Chhetri castes are literate. Janajati people, with the exception of the Kathmandu-dweller Newars, have literacy rate in the range of 58.64%. This pattern is also reflected in the human development index (HDI): the HDIs of all Brahmans-Chhetris and Janajatis excluding Newars are 0.538 and 0.482 respectively. The Janajati peoples are by no means a homogenous group and they have different levels of status. Overall, most Janajatis have a higher poverty rate compared to 'high caste' groups, such as Brahmans and Chhetris. This is not to say that the 'high caste' groups are not poor; there are very poor people, too, particularly Chhetris living in the Far and Mid-West mountains (Subba et al., 2014). Overall, there is differentiated socio-economic status between the Janajati and non-Janajati 'high caste' people: 'High caste' Brahmans and Chhetris have relatively higher educational achievements, literacy, and per capita income than the Janajati people.

Students' Learning Performance by Ethnicity

Several personal, family, and school-related factors contribute to learning performance at different level of intensities and to different directions. For example, family's socio-economic status (e.g., education of parents and per capita income) positively explain their children's academic performance (Li & Qiu, 2018; Farooq et al., 2011; Gooding, 2001). However, a person's gender, ethnicity, religion, or culture also have considerable impact. Studies have also shown that family's ethnicity, as a social position, determines children's learning performance. For example, in a study in Peru and Chile Indigenous children's learning achievement was lower than the non-indigenous children's (Arteaga & Glewwe, 2014; Vallejos, 2021).

In Nepal's context, too, studies conducted in this area have shown similar findings. Devkota et al. (2020) concluded that parental occupations, age, marital status and regions were responsible for the lower level of educational participation and attainment among the indigenous and lower-caste Dalit students. Mathema and Bista (2006) study of the School Leaving Certificate Examination (SLC, after completing the grade X) also found great variation in students' academic performance by their ethnicities; majority of the Janajati students' learning performance was significantly lower than that of the Brahman, Chhetri and Newer students. Similarly, in an assessment of the Mathematics and Nepali subjects of grade five, and national assessment (of all subjects) of grade eight, the learning performance of the Janajati students was found to be lower than the Brahmans-Chhetris, and that for the Dalits was lower than the Janajatis (ERO, 2019). In line with this, Acharya et al. (2011) found that the result of grade eight Brahman-Chhetri students in Social Studies, Mathematics, and Nepali subjects were better than other caste/ ethnic groups.

Majority of these studies have consistently shown that the students from Janajati ethnicities have lower academic performance than the non-Janajati Brahman-Chhetri groups. However, the evidence from national and international studies also indicates that there are no uniform results on the effect of students' indigeneity on their learning performance. In Nepal's context the question about the ethnicity and learning performances at the higher/tertiary (including the grade eleven, and twelve) has not been adequately examined. Hence, this paper attempts to investigate this issue by examining the performances and explanatory factors concerning the grade XII students in Nepal.

Educational Success and Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory

This study examines and explores the learning performance of Indigenous students from the perspective of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory. For Bourdieu, capitals are sum of assets that can be put in productive use, and they take various forms: economic, social, cultural and symbolic (Ibid). Cultural capital theory has been widely applied in educational settings. According to Bourdieu (1986, p. 16), cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. Embodied is discussed as language, mannerisms, preferences which are the manifestation of the 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body', objectified means 'cultural goods' such as educational materials (for example books, pictures, instruments and so on), and institutionalized refers to educational credentials. Bourdieu's study gave a clear break to the view that educational successes or failures are the results of 'natural aptitudes' (p.17). According to him, children benefit from the class (or status position in our case) social position that determines their tastes and preferences, which eventually reproduces their class position. These are likely to inculcate in the higher-class family and the parents that they are either unknowingly imposing or investing to transmitting their cultural tastes and preferences to their children. Therefore, as a result of these inheritances or investments, there is more chances in higher-class students to gain educational success as compared to low-class students (Jæger & Møllegaard, 2017; Sullivan, 2001; Bourdieu, 1986).

We borrow the Bourdieu's cultural capital theory from the class-led social positions in the French society to the caste/ethnicity led social status (positions) in Nepal's (and by extension in South Asian) context. In the qualitative part of this study, we have attempted to explore the students' social position and family background in term of parents' education, learning environment at home, socio-cultural condition and economic status. We were interested in understanding how families' preferences and occupational traditions predispose the children towards certain occupations, and how this influences their educational performances. In addition to this, we also seek to understand how the school environment with respect to curriculum, teachers' and friends' behaviours and overall learning conditions also affects students' preferences.

METHOD

This study primarily follows sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design wherein quantitative research is used for determining the level of learning achievements of Janajati students with reference to non-Janajati students (particularly from the Brahman-Chhetri background). A qualitative in-depth-interview method is applied for exploring factors associated with the students' learning achievements. In another words, it has two strands: Quan→QUAL (quantitative followed by qualitative), and final inferences are drawn from the results of both methods using multiple philosophical positions (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2008). These methods are complementary to each other. The reason behind the application of these methods is to confirm or disconfirm the existing understanding towards the learning performances of Janajati students, and, to further explore the reasons behind differential learning performances. A Kathmandu-based private school was selected as a case study school.

In the first phase, students' grade XII exam results were collected covering five consecutive years between 2015 and 2019. This data allowed us to compare the students' results, which is used as a proxy variable for learning performances to the longitude data was used to find out trends in learning performance (factor) rather than the progress of the same students over the years (Cohen et al., 2018). Grade XII examinations are administered externally by the National Education Board (NEB). The sample school has been running nursery to bachelor level classes for the last twenty-six years and has two streams: Management and Science. The school record shows that it has nearly 50% of the students from the Janajati group (Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rai and Limbu). All the students including both the Arya-Khas and Janajati groups who appeared in Grade XII final examinations were included in the sample. Altogether, the total number of students who appeared in the grade XII examinations during the study period were 770. Over half of them (396) were from the non-Janajati background and just below half (374) of them were from the Janajati groups. Out of 396 non-Janajati students, 52% (207) were boys and 48% (189) were girls, and of the 374 Janajati students 57% (212) were boys and 43% (162) were girls.

The second phase of this study, which applied qualitative interview method, was to explore the reasons behind students' differential learning performances (Yin, 2014; Creswell & Clark, 2011). Five respondents (made of three students and two teachers) representing the same Janajati categories and belonging to the same school were

purposively selected for detailed interviews. Their ethnic composition was as follows: two Magars, and one each from the Rai, Gurung, and Newar ethnic groups. Inclusion of the teachers from the same background was to understand their perspectives based on the lived cultural experience vis-à-vis their experience in dealing with both the Janajati and non-Janajati students over the years. The in-depth interview with the students from the Janajati families helped to understand their socio-cultural milieus and family and individual preferences, on the one hand, and their perception of the school environment on the other. There are two points to clarify: First, though the size of the second sample is rather small, the in-depth interviews still made it possible to generate common themes, which were useful to explore the social position of the students and how they affected their learning performances. All the respondents were experienced, mature and competent through further studies, occupational engagements and age. However, we are mindful not draw too many conclusions through small differences or thin evidences. While further studies might be necessary to ascertain the predictive variations of various factors, the current study does the necessary groundworks and identifies salient factors. Second, the researchers were aware of their positionality as an outsider (in terms of caste/ethnicity) during interviews and meaning making. As it was an online interview, the participants felt comfortable to express their opinions. It was made clear through the initial communications that the participants' views and experiences were important which we believe has helped neutralise the "power relations" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researchers have attempted to generate analytical themes through the participants' perspectives, and presented cases and evidences to inform the findings. We use pseudonyms in order to anonymize the respondents and this assurance was vital in soliciting information as accurately as possible.

An interview protocol was prepared following Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model (1979) that illustrates the holistic view of a child's overall development and includes four factors: Macro-exo-meso-micro systems that positively affect a child's achievement. Out of these factors, this study concentrates on meso-exo-micro system that includes school climate, teacher's professionalism, family, peers or caregivers that directly or indirectly affect the children's learning. Thematic content analysis was applied in the data analysis, in which emerging sub-themes were merged into two major themes: school-related and home-related factors. Included in the school-related themes were: classroom environment, curriculum and instruction, teacher-staff behaviour, whereas home-related themes included family and community perception toward education, parents' education, and occupations and economic situation, and cultural practices (including tastes and preferences).

After obtaining consents, interviews were conducted online via ZOOM platform, as it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interview during the first COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The first author conducted all the interviews, each one lasting for nearly 40 minutes. The interviews were recorded in audio-visual mode. Interviews were conducted in Nepali language, and later translated and transcribed into English. Based on the interview protocol, the data were coded and thematized, and similarities and differences were also identified across the cases and results were deduced.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to the data gathered, 770 students of grade XII appeared physically in the final examination between the year 2015 and 2019 following the conventional method. Students' result was assessed in Grade Average Point (GPA) out of 4. This grade point categorized by NEB in seven letters is as follows: A+ (3.6 to 4), A (3.2 to <3.6), B+ (2.8 to < 3.2), B (2.4 to < 2.8), C+ (2 to < 2.4), C (1.6 to <2), D+ (1.2 to <1.6), D (.8 to <1.2) and E (0 to <.8) (CDC, 2018). The results (average GPA) of students by ethnicity across the five-year period are presented in the figure 1.

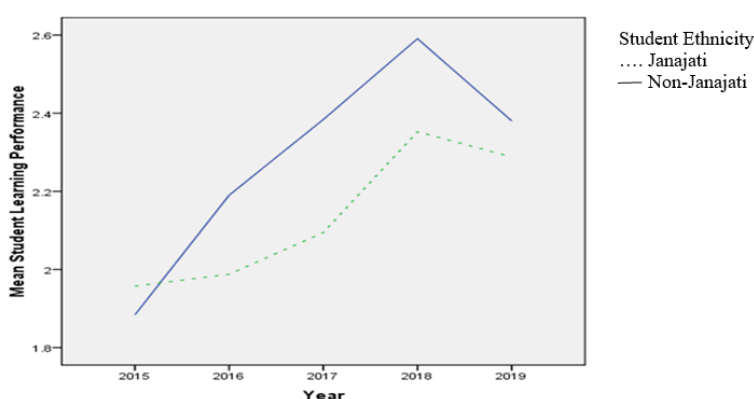


Figure 1 Learning performance trend at grade XII at the sample school by ethnicity and years

Figure 1 shows that, overall, students’ average learning performance has risen steadily between 2015 and 2018. There is a sudden break in the trend in 2019 but the average GPA in 2019 is still much higher than in 2015. In 2015, the grade XII result of Janajati students was slightly better than that of the non-Janajati students, but in the subsequent four years, the non-Janajati students had had persistently much better results compared the Janajatis. The results across the gender of Janajati and non-Janajati students was also found in a similar trend. Furthermore, whether the difference on the learning performance across these two groups was (statistically) significant, is the major concern of this study, and it was tested using a t-test after satisfying necessary assumptions. The result of the t-test is presented in the table 1.

Table 1 Student learning performance by ethnicity

		Levine's Test for Equality of Var.		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Difference	95% CI of the Diff.	
									Lower	Upper
GPA in Grade XII	EVA	.463	.496	4.228	768	.000	.179	.042	.096	.263
	EVNA			4.222	759	.000	.179	.042	.096	.263

Note: EVA= Equal Variance Assumed, EVNA = Equal variance not Assumed, df= Degree of Freedom, CI= Confidence Interval and Diff. = Difference

The results from equal variance assumed is taken for analyzing the result of t-test. The t-statistic 4.228 is found to be significant ($p=.000$) at 1% level of significant. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected, which means that the research hypothesis that 'There was a significant difference in students' learning performance between the non-Janajati and Janajati students' stands. Hence, this can be concluded that the XII grade results of Janajati students (in the case study school) is significantly lower than that of the non-Janajati students. The mean difference of the GPA is 0.179. This analysis confirms the results of past studies (Devkota et al., 2020; ERO, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019; Acharya et al., 2011; Mathema & Bista, 2006). In the next section, we present the results of the qualitative study to help understand the context behind such gaps.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the following sub-sections, five case stories (of the three students and two teachers) are presented and analysed, following two major themes as an analytical basis: School-related factors and home-related factors.

Madan's Story

Madan is a man with about thirty years of age, from the Rai (Janajati) community of eastern part of the country and was a student of management stream. He has completed two master's degrees: Master of Business Studies (MBS) and Master of Public Administration (MPA) and was pursuing another degree: a Bachelor of Law at the time of the interview. He holds a coveted officer position in public (Government) services. During the interview, he was staying in Pokhara, a tourist city in western Nepal.

School-related Factors

He completed his study of grade XII from the case study school. He describes the environment of the college (In Nepal, +2 level or grade XI and XII is also referred to as college due to the earlier system in which intermediate level was a part of the university/college systems): "I enjoyed almost everything at the college; it had comfortable situation, conducive educational environment, and easy and comprehensible teaching methods." However, he perceived the curriculum as not being practically fit and relevant to everyone. He added: "It [curriculum] is prepared with the bird's eye view from the capital city and implemented in remote and rural areas." He highlighted the medium of teaching (Nepali) at the primary school was a barrier for the Janajati students to excel. He remembered his village school this way:

...For example, there was a school in a Limbu community where most of the kids belonging to that community would go to study, but they were taught in Nepali language. ...teaching-learning activities would not be effective at all, and the students would not last even a year or so at the school, thereby increasing the dropout rate.

However, he did not have any bad experience in the college, especially in grade XII as he found the teachers behaving well towards their students. However, there was an incident in the grade IX which he still remembers: "Once, while I was in Grade nine, I told my mathematics teacher that I was confused about finding a diameter of a cone. The teacher looked at my paper and reacted rudely. He said 'I am not free now. I am not

your tutor to solve the problems whenever you wish.” At that time, Madan believed it was possibly a case of discrimination against him. However, at the time of the interview, he was in doubt if he was discriminated against due his ethnicity.

Home-related Factors

Madan reported to have come from a family with weak financial status. During the school, he struggled even having essential materials such as textbooks, pen and notebooks:

While I was in Grade 4, my copy [notebook] was stolen. Terrified of the potentially bad reaction to me, I did not disclose it at home. Fortunately, after a while, one of my friends said that he had witnessed another friend taking it out of my bag. Having reported to the teacher, I got my copy back. I had nothing to write on until I got the book back.

Madan came to Kathmandu (capital city of Nepal) for further studies. If he did not have his brother in Kathmandu, he would not have been able to go to a private collage and continue his studies there. Madan’s brother was waiting to go aboard for an unskilled labour migration. Madan had to struggle a lot for survival in the capital city, where he faced a number of problems while searching for a job: “While looking for a job, I came across a number of obstacles: fake job advertisements, cheating, refusal to pay salaries for the work done and many more.” His family was supportive of his study, although, as he recalls, his community was not very positive towards education. He thinks, among other things, it is to do with the weak financial position and poor educational background of the families. He shared the general trend prevalent in families and home environment as not being supportive towards learning:

I do not think there has been satisfactory learning culture in most of such [Janajati] families ...since they (parents) never went to school themselves and studied. The children from such families do not have support for their study at home, and as a result, they are not so conscious of the need for, and sincere about, the studies. They have no one to check and see if they are opening books and studying at home

Madan's family was dependent on agriculture, the common occupation of people in his village. In his Rai community, there is a deep-rooted culture to do everything possible to join the armed forces as a Gorkha (br. Gurkha) in the British Army, Singapore Police, or Indian Army (in that preferential order). If failed, some would prefer to join Nepal’s armed forces. Serving in the foreign armed/police forces, they are known as *Lahure* in Nepal. There is a huge respect for a *Lahure* in Janajati community, and ‘Gurkhas’ are well known for their bravery throughout the world. The preference (as a cultural predisposition) for being *Lahure* means that education does not become the top priority of the many. Surprisingly enough, Madan did not like to become a *Lahure* though he sounded bit contradictory: “They (friends) often talked about joining a training camp¹. If

¹ There are numerous private institutions offering classes and physical training in order to prepare and increase the chance of recruitment in the British Army (and Singapore Police). Thousands of

I had been financially strong, I would have joined the training as well, and if I were lucky, I might have been working in the [British] army at this moment instead (soft laughter).”

Ureka's Story

Ureka is a student of management and is 25 years old. She is from a Janajati family, with a medium economic class. In terms of performance in school, she was an average student of her class. Now, she is studying for the Bachelor of Business Studies in a public college in Kathmandu.

School-related Factors

Ureka had friendly environment in her class. She does not have any notable experience that hurt her due to teachers' or students' behaviors. She said Sunil (Pseudonym) was her ideal teacher. There was always a uniquely different vibe when he taught. She particularly enjoyed his teaching methods, which were very easy to understand. In her words: “Another teacher, Eman (pseudonym) sir was hardworking, and he always used to think for the betterment of students.” She said that she enjoyed, and was encouraged by her classroom environment.

Ureka comes from a Magar (the most populous Janajati group, predominantly from the western hills of Nepal) family. At the school, her friends used to call her by using a what is now considered slightly derogatory caste name primarily applied to Sherpa and Tamang groups of the mountains of Nepal: “My friends used to call me *Bhote*, which I did not take seriously. In return, I used to give them a name too as part of making fun as well.” Though she smiled while saying this unwillingly, she also indicated that classroom environment was not too cosy for her. She clarified: “They must mean to address us with such words to look down upon us. Though we took it lightly, the society must have invented such expressions in order to dominate us.”

She thinks she was a bright student in elementary classes, but she could not maintain her status throughout. She was demotivated due to the unsatisfactory results that she had in the grade XII exams. She shared that girl get constant pressure by their families to get married with a *Lahure* and it seriously affects their ability to concentrate in their studies. Ureka generalising this trend in her Magar and other Janajati communities said, “I think it is mostly because of our family background. For instance, if a *Lahure* comes to ask for her hands (proposing for a marriage), the girls' family would not want this to go away and pressurize the girls for the marriage. This is the situation in Janajati communities.”

youths in their late teens, primarily from the Janajati background, join these courses paying hefty fees and leaving studies for months. Only about 250 are selected in the British Army (including about 100 reserved for the Singapore Police) every year. Though in principle there is now no restriction by ethnicity, primarily four Janajati groups namely, Gurung and Magars (from the western hills of Nepal) and Rai and Limbu (from the eastern hills) are dominant and disproportionately represented in the British Gurkha services (See Laksamba et al., 2014).

In the inquiry about curriculum, subject or contents, she thought they were okay for her. She did not feel this being too favorable to some and unfavorable to others irrespective of their ethnicities. However, the language was an issue. Although she speaks Nepali very well, it is not her mother tongue. Magar community though clubbed together as one ethnic group, speak many different native languages, and for many, Nepali is their second language. She highlighted how Nepali is spoken in her community: “For instance, we write the way we speak. And, in our language all the family members, senior or junior, are addressed using the same verbs, with which the rules of Nepali grammar are not compatible.” Her expression clearly indicated the language was a barrier to some extent for many especially in primary level, in getting better results in some subjects.

Home-related Factors

As discussed earlier, after completing their school education, most Janajati families have a tradition to attempt to join their sons in the British Army. It is linked to the economic issues and better livelihood opportunities, and she opined that this leads to a large number of students dropping out of the school: “The boys quit school after SLC (high school level) and start preparing to join the security forces, and the girls are forced to marry at an early age.” However, she said that some of her friends were not interested in joining the foreign armed forces; they were rather interested in completing a higher education. Similarly, Ureka feels lucky to have a good learning environment at home; her family was always supportive. She pointed out the lack of (sufficient) role models in the family and community who have excelled academically. There was still a gap in counselling and motivations: “One thing I felt later on is that seeking guidance and suggestions for higher education and job prospects from someone belonging to our own community was quite challenging since there were very few of them with necessary qualifications or experience.” To her this lack of ‘cultural capital’ is also a lack of instruments to predispose them towards further education. She thinks some traditional practices, for example, long-held traditions of drinking and merry making in Janajati communities, might have placed students in a disadvantages position. They often create an uncongenial environment, and it becomes hard for children to focus on their studies and meet their expectations. In her views, poor economic status, parents’ (and communities’) low academic background and uncongenial learning environment at home contribute to the low academic performances in children.

Bikas's Story

Bikas was a student of science stream and is about 20-year-old. He is from a Magar community from mid-western part of the country. He lost his father in his childhood, and his family was economically poor. For his overall education and living, he was supported by a non-governmental social organization. He continued his education, and now, he is studying for a Bachelor of Engineering in Kathmandu.

School-related Factors

Bikash did not have any problem in his classroom. The classroom environment was a friendly and supportive, and he had talented friends from non-Janajati background with

whom he would work and hang out. He found this socialisation in school immensely helpful to his learning. However, in his experience, the teachers, who were primarily from the non-Janajati background, namely from the Chhetri, Brahman groups, would focus more on the talented students, who also came from the same caste background: “I have never had any such experiences (of biasness or discriminatory attitudes shown towards Janajati or non-Janajati students). I have not heard of any such instances with my friends either.” However, Bikas was worried about what went on the primary school in his village:

Based on what I observed in my village, it is quite worrying that the teachers of the primary school would spend time sunbathing, the classes would be empty most often, and a single pen, pencil and notebook could last the whole academic session because there was nothing to read or write about.

Regarding curriculum and course contents, he did not seem to be satisfied with courses as it was more theoretical: “The dominant theory has eclipsed practical sides, which ultimately result into more troubles with learning possibilities. However, I have not found the curriculums to be hurtful to the sentiments of Janajati students and contradictory to their rituals till now.” He too agrees that Janajati students have language disadvantages, as the Nepali language is compulsory for all: “Still, I think it would be better if the languages that Janajatis speak were given due attention and space in the curriculum instead of writing everything in Nepali language.”

Home-related Factors

According to Bikas, the Magar community, in which he belongs to, has still set beliefs that joining military, going aboard or doing manual works is far shorter way to generate livelihood means than through the lengthy path of education. Many people in the community lack fertile farmland. Many live in relatively cold mountains and do not generate enough production from their farms. As Bikas shared his experience, parents in his village were not ready to invest in their children's education. They would send their children to do manual works for others, and they themselves were involved in farming. So, they rarely thought about education. Although there are gradual changes in the mind-set of those community people towards education, there is still a problem related to early marriages among girls:

In case of my village, the girls get married at an early age, which, I think is not the scenario in cities. Most of them [girls] do so [get early marriage] because they find Lahure boys to elope with, which they think would be the best decision.

Many parents are unable to afford fees and learning materials, which force children to leave schools and engage in something to contribute to the family's livelihood. Bikas put his own case this way: “If the organization did not support me, I think I would be wandering aimlessly like friends back in the village. I might probably have become a Lahure or gone to India for some jobs. Not many Magar families are educated; so, they don't know the benefits of educating their children.” Conversely, Bikas continues to be supported by the organization that looked after him from his orphan age. That is why he is able to continue his higher education.

Kamala's Story

Kamala is a teacher from a Gurung community of eastern Nepal. She had been teaching social sciences at the case study for the past three years. Previously she also taught Janajati and non-Janajati children in elementary classes for a long time.

School-related Factors

In Kamala's experience, generally, there was no discrimination between Janajati and non-Janajati students in the classroom: "Regarding educational context, I do not find any discriminatory role of the state or the school concerning ethnicity. I think equality has been ensured irrespective of the students' caste/ethnic background." Regarding the seemingly poor performance of the Janajati children, she has accepted that the children are left behind from the elementary classes: "Janajati students seem to lag behind once they fail to comprehend the lesson, and the teachers do not seem to be doing enough in backing them up so that they can catch up other students." In her observation, teachers do not give sufficient time for weak students, and, thus, they are failed or upgraded without adequate learning:

In the case of weak students, I think the problem lies with a lack of complete attention paid to them. Failing to address their learning deficiencies on time leaves the problems remain unaddressed even in secondary level and affect their academic performance in the long run.

As another reason for poor performance, she also experienced the medium of language acting as a disadvantage to them:

The Janajatis and Madhesi (people residing in the Tarai region) come from their own ancestral regions and have their own mother tongues. So, they obviously face difficulties grasping the advanced and literary use of words, when they still have difficulty getting through basic rules of Nepali language.

She finds some non-Janajati teachers having dominant behaviour to Janajati children: "Janajati students are often termed or regarded by the teacher with generalized and presupposed images as flat-nosed, midget, beady-eyed and dull." This hurts their dignity and creates a feeling of inferiority in the classroom. This eventually may be a demotivating factor in education.

Home-related Factors

As discussed above most Janajati families, especially Rai, Limbu, Magar and Gurung have predominant tradition of becoming a *Lahure* in order to improve the financial status and obtain social prestige. Kamala too has an experience to share:

They are more focused on making their sons Lahure in the British Army and sending sons aboard for employment. Janajati students are more habituated to the discussion of going abroad, joining security forces and earning money. This leads to the early family settlement practice and discourages the idea of spending more time on studies. The selection and pre-training sessions begin in the course of their 10+2 education. So, they

either quit their studies or skip a maximum number of classes. When failed to be recruited [and a large number do fail], they hardly re-join the college (+2 education). This is a reason why dropout rate of Janajati students is higher [than the national average].

Kamala opined that Janajati people have a cooperative culture of helping each other, particularly their kin, when in need. “For example, an economically sound family is always ready to bear the educational expenses of poor relatives” She, however, thinks that such practices sometimes could be counter-productive because the children who stay with the rich relatives for their study could lose their parents' love and care. She puts it this way “...On the other hand, they also undergo feelings of humiliation among their friends and other relatives when they are conscious of being completely dependent on others.” This indicates that the students may not have supportive learning environment at home, which is essential for advancing children's learning for better education. To have attraction towards children's education, parents' education is also vital. Kamala sums this up with a metaphor: “We know a healthy tree cannot yield bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Here, I am indicating at the educational environment at the students' home.” Furthermore, in her experience, the literacy rate among most Janajati communities is comparatively lower, which could be an indication of lower emphasis towards education. Such tendency may, eventually have a circular effecting, acting as an unwelcoming environment at home, and, thus, damaging the educational prospects of the children as well.

Bidhan's Story

Bidhan is a teacher of management stream in +2 (XI and XII) level in the case school, where he has been teaching for the last five years. He is from a Newar community of the Kathmandu valley. Unlike other Janajati communities, his community is more advanced in terms of human development index (education, income, and life expectancy). He has more closely observed the children of Tamang community living around his community.

School-related Factors

To him Janajati students' participation in the classroom depends on the nature of course and the teacher's role: “If a course requires their mandatory participation, they are ready for it; otherwise, they try to avoid those tasks which they themselves have to initiate and complete.” He mentioned some teachers' unethical behavior towards school children: “They use informal expressions to address the students, such as using nick the names based on their ethnic background like Nayar for the Newars and Tharu for someone from the Chaudhary community.” These are discouraging expressions, which could demotivate the students from the learning activities: “At times, the teachers might use such expressions to be more informal but the particular students may feel guilty or uneasy among their friends and close circle.”

He also echoed about the language barrier: “The students, especially, the migrant ones, have some difficulty in understanding certain terminologies and because of cultural variation, they hesitate to express themselves as well.” He thinks the existing curriculum is unfriendly to some Janajati students: “Moreover, such curriculums are

based on subject matters that these students are not familiar about.” Further, in his observation of financially poor Janajati families, he found their children less focused on the study due to the engagement in manual works to earn to pay the school fees. In his own words: “For instance, in the course of the educational tour and similar other programs, students from those communities remain absent almost for a week so that they can do some manual works like carrying sand or fetching water jars in order to earn some money.” This affects their learning and contributes to the poor learning performance.

Home-related Factors

In Bidhan’s experience, the Janajati families are mostly involved in farming and labour related work and, thus, many are backward. Therefore, they do not pay great attention to education: “I think it is mainly due to economic factor. The parents do not seem to be more conscious about their children’s study since they have first to solve issues of joining hands to mouth.” In his observation of Lama or Tamang communities, they are migrants to the valley, and are financially poor and educationally backward. Interestingly, students from these groups are found to be involved in certain manual works, such as sand mining during the school hours to earn some money to celebrate the Dasain festival. Besides these factors, he has also observed some Janajati students’ irregularities in the classes due to cultural activities: “Culture and rituals have been the prime factors behind such irregularities since Newar and even Tamang communities have culture-based festivals almost every day throughout the year.”

DISCUSSION

The survey of the students’ learning performance exhibited through the grade XII national examination results for the five years from 2015 to 2019 of the case study school in Kathmandu showed that Janajati students’ learning performance in grade XII is significantly lower as compared to non-Janajati students. Analysis of the results by gender showed similar trends. In order to explain these variations, qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with three students and two teachers from the Janajati background, related to the case school. The respondents’ narratives were clustered under two themes: School-related and home-related factors. Through the qualitative study, several factors that contributed to the low performance of the Janajati students were emerged.

On the school-related factors, school’s environment and treatment of Janajati students at schools were examined. The results show, largely, these students were treated equally, on par their non-Janajati counterparts at school. They did not have any problems related to teaching and learning environment. However, there were some exceptions as some students experienced unusually dominant behaviors of their teachers towards students. Some teachers and students bully (other) students often labelling bad nicknames to them (Dahal, 2013). Dalit students in particulars have experienced discriminatory behaviours at schools but these experiences appear to be rapidly changing for better in recent decades (Adhikari & Gellner, in press). In Nepal majority of teachers come from the so-called ‘higher caste’ groups.

Adhikari, Nepali and Gellner (in press) in the study of Dalits in the School Curriculum project observed teachers' behavior and categorised the in three groups: (a) progressive (thus empathetic to the Dalit students and spearheading changes), (b) moderate (sharing some sympathies but not fully sharing ethos of equalities), and (c) conservative (behaving in a way that helped to reproduce the status quo rather than advanced changes as expected in the curriculum). Though our study showed that teachers did care Janajati students, we did not explore similar characterization, and whether the Janajati students were treated differently. Our study showed that there were instances that the Janajati students did feel the pain. This finding is similar to those from some studies in international contexts. For example, Mabin (2016)'s study revealed, "Black, Hispanic, and non-Black or Hispanic Minority students showed a significant decrease in the perception of care from White teachers."

Studies show uncongenial classroom situation weakens the student-teacher relationship (Dahal et al., 2019) which eventually affects the students' learning performance (Roorda et al., 2011; McKown & Weinstein, 2002). In line with Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, for higher-class students, teachers also supposedly tend to have upwardly biased perceptions of children's academic ability (Radulovic et al., 2020; Jæger & Møllegaard, 2017) that creates ignorance to lower-class students due to their low level of cultural capital. This ultimately causes low learning performance. In Nepal's context, teachers' *One-Size-Fits-All* teaching methods may not suit all students coming from the different socio-economic backgrounds and social positions.

One theme that consistently emerged in our study is the medium of teaching at primary level that affected students' learning performance. Most Janajati students have their own mother tongue, which is different from the Nepali, which is the medium of teaching in Nepal's schools. Janajati students often face difficulty in communicating in standard Nepali at primary level, and this has a lasting impact on their learning. Since 1990, Nepal has started promoting multi-lingual education after the promulgation of the constitution 1990. The 2015 constitution of Nepal made multi-lingual primary education a constitutional right (Fillmore, 2020; Paudel, 2018). The constitutional rights and national education policy for multi-lingual education is expected to help mitigate the problems faced by the Janajati students. However, the progress made to this direction as to sluggish, and studies show that these recent efforts are not without problems (Dhakal, 2015). Some difficulties observed include insufficient or inappropriate learning materials, a scarcity of teachers, and insufficient time allocation (Fillmore, 2020).

The other school-related factor that emerged from the study is the relevance of the contents to the lives of the (Janajati) students. Even though the respondents did not detail what aspect of the curriculum was irrelevant to their context, this finding calls for further investigation in this area. At the context of the decentralised curriculum policies recently adopted in Nepal, the local government bodies need to consider seriously these findings while designing their localised curriculums.

Overall, the home-related factors were perceived to be more influencing. A consistently emerging narrative pattern among the respondents was that there is widespread practice

to and preference for becoming a *Lahure* (British, Singapore, or Indian army). Those going abroad for employment is increasingly becoming a widespread practice among almost all communities in Nepal, the traditional practice among some Janajati groups to go abroad for certain kinds of job seems to have differentiated impact on their learning performances in school. Many Janajati families continue to gear their resources towards joining Gorkha services in the foreign armies. A large number of them join training institutions as opposed to large number of non-Janajatis taking additional tuition classes preparing for the public services in Nepal. As a large number of the Janajati youths aspire to become a *Lahure*, education becomes a secondary goal for many resulting in relatively lower learning performances. By way of their tradition and occupations, many of them seem to have believed that education is not their pathway of life. Lack of awareness among parents regarding the importance of education means there is higher rates of school dropout among the Janajati students. For some students, even family and community rituals and cultural activities also seemed to have affected their regularity in the schools. Moreover, all participants agreed that the poor family educational background affects affordability and distracts school regularities. In our study, respondents highlighted the existence of such problems among some Janajati and migrants families.

These findings are consistent with some of the research works such as Fletcher and Tienda (2010), and Arteaga and Glewwe (2014), and largely with the Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory about lower learning performance of some groups conditioned by their family circumstances rather than the natural aptitudes. In the context of Nepal, our finding on the differentiated learning performance confirm those by other studies (ERO 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019; Mathema & Bista, 2006).

While looking at the socio-economic and education aspects of Janajati students and their families, overall, Janajati groups have relatively lower level of the socio-economic and human development status. Of course, Dalits, Muslims and some other groups' position is even worse but we did not study these groups in this paper. Janajati groups by no means are homogenous and they too have differential socio-economic and literacy status, which also reflects on their learning varied performances at school level. The five scale grading of Janajati groups (as endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged, and advanced groups Lama, 2018) is useful in this context. The Newar and Thakali ethnic groups, which fall in the advance category, have better social-economic status, while some other groups have much worse position.

Even within some disadvantaged groups, there are relatively affluent Janajati groups, particularly those engaged in the foreign armies. However, large majority of them are poor and engaged in agriculture or in foreign labour migration. Even within the Brahman, Chhetri groups there is great variation and similar experiences are not uncommon in some regions. As experienced by the participant students and teachers, these socio-cultural factors, poor economic background, and poor family education background are factors contributing to the learning performance of the Janajati students. These results are in line with the studies in Pakistan and India, the respective studies of by Farooq et al. (2011) and Dev (2016) respectively, which showed the significant effect

of socio-economic status, parents' education, and home environment on students' overall academic performance. Overall, the study showed that low endowment of all three major forms of capital as suggested by Bourdieu (1986) determine families' social positions, which, eventually, affect students' learning performances.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Janajati (Indigenous) students, particularly from the marginalized families, have lower learning performance as reflected in the grade XII results. This is true both for the male and female students. Nepal has started a new federal governance system, with more powers devolved to the local government, including in the governance of the local education system. Local governments have power to design curriculum as per the local needs. Will these changes help mitigate the schools' problems such as higher dropouts among the ethnic and Dalit groups, and differentiated learning performances among them? While it will take time to find the answer, these problems are still a cause for concern.

The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that Janajati students are still disadvantaged position despite constitution's promise to bring all students into the mainstream of education. This is not to say that all Janajati student share the same fate and all non-Janajati Brahman, Chhetri groups enjoy the higher privileges and, thus, have higher educational achievements. There are other disadvantaged groups, such as Muslims and Dalits who fare even worse socio-economic status and unfriendly school environment. Their dropout rates and learning performances are much worse too. They are the subject to a different study, but the factors contributing to their learning performance are likely to be similar.

In case of the Janajati students, the study showed that home-related factors were more prevalent than the school-related factors in the students with lower learning performances. While family economic backgrounds and parental education also had a role to play, cultural factors (such as relative lack of predisposition towards education, one the one hand and aspiration for different occupations, on the other) were the most important factors influencing lower learning performance. From the perspective of the participating students, school-related factors, namely the indifference and demotivating actions of some teachers, application of less-student friendly teaching methods in some contexts, and the use of a non-native language as the medium of instruction (particularly at the primary level) were all significant problems (to various extents).

While family-related economic and educational issues are important to be addressed, interventional school programs such as for the adoption of the student-friendly medium of instruction may help Janajati students to improve their current learning performance. School-related education policies, curricula, and pedagogical approaches need to consider specific interests of the (Janajati) students, language diversity of the communities concerned and contents that are more relevant to their daily lives. We suggest for further research building on these findings covering more people in different areas in order for the results to be more representatives of the diverse ethnic population in Nepal.

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