

Assessing Equity Among Students in Public Schools of Rautahat District: A Multi-Level Analysis of Equity From Above, Middle, And Below

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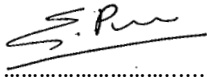
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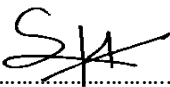


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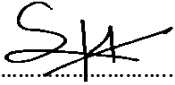


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Declaration

I affirm that the thesis entitled “Assessing Equity among Students in Public Schools of Rautahat District: A Multi-Level Examination of Equity from Above, Middle and Below” is my original work and has not been submitted to any educational institution for the fulfillment of any other academic degree.



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Abstract

Education is an essential human right that empowers individuals and promotes social mobility and economic progress. Nevertheless, achieving educational equity remains a crucial challenge, particularly in rural public schools. This study investigates educational equity in Nepal's Rautahat District, utilizing a multi-level approach that encompasses macro (policy level), meso (school level), and micro (individual level) perspectives.

The study utilizes Sen's capability approach and Unterhalter's dimensions of equity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing equity in education. The research aims to assess educational equity in schools by mapping existing policies, programs, and strategies that promote equitable education. It evaluates the availability and effectiveness of these policies, plans, and programs within schools. Additionally, the study delves into students' perspectives on these policies, assessing their satisfaction and whether the initiatives have adequately addressed the diverse needs and backgrounds of individuals. Furthermore, the research explores inclusivity and examines students' experiences to identify and address the unique challenges faced by learners from diverse backgrounds.

The data collection procedure for this research employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The primary data is gathered through field visits, surveys, and interviews, while the secondary data is obtained from relevant research articles, reports, and municipal records. The study's sample consists of 600 respondents, selected from 12 public schools in Yamunamai Rural Municipality and Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality. In each school, 10 students from each grade enrolled in grades 3–8 were chosen to ensure representation from diverse student backgrounds.

This study encompasses a comprehensive analysis of various factors, such as age, gender, grade, ethnicity, religion, and income level, to undertake a thorough and profound evaluation of maintaining equity. By examining these factors, the research aims to acquire a deeper comprehension of how the interplay of these diverse demographic characteristics affects educational equity. This method allows for a more nuanced examination of the challenges and opportunities experienced by different student populations, thus contributing to the formulation of targeted interventions that promote an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

The research offers valuable insights for policymakers, school administrators, and stakeholders to create an inclusive and fair educational environment. By addressing equity at policy, school, and individual levels, the study aims to develop evidence-based interventions for equal opportunities and outcomes for all students. The research emphasizes the need to assess the effectiveness of current equity initiatives, as their mere existence may not benefit marginalized groups. Adopting a comprehensive approach, the study seeks to identify interconnected dimensions to address educational disparities. Ultimately, the research aims to bridge the gap in education and promote positive social change, empowering individuals and enhancing societal well-being beyond the Rautahat District.

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List of Abbreviation

CA	Capability Approach
DOE	Department of Education
DRM	Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECA	Extra-Curricular Activities
ECED	Early Childhood Education and Development
EMIS	Education Management Information Systems
EFA	Education for All
FGD	Focus group discussions
IEMIS	Integrated Educational Management Information system
NPA	National Plan of Action
MTB-MLE	Mother tongue-based multilingual Education
Mol	Medium of instruction
MoFALD	Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
SSRP	School Sector Reform Plan
UDHR	Universal Declaration of human rights
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VDC	Village Development Committee
YRM	Yamunamai Rural Municipality

Introduction

1.1 Background

Education is universally acknowledged and valued as the primary means through which individuals acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate life, coexist harmoniously with others, contribute to societal organization, and enhance their livelihoods. The definition and understanding of education may differ across cultures, periods, and educational theories and ideologies, both past and present. However, there is a consensus that education is an integral component of human development, and an individual's access to education significantly influences the quality of their personal life, the structure of social systems, the broader society, and their interactions with the environment. It holds immense significance as a fundamental right that empowers individuals, fosters social mobility, and drives economic development.

Simultaneously, there is a continuing global debate about incorporating equity into educational systems worldwide. The concept of equity has emerged to bring together two terms: equity and quality in the supply of education in each nation. Equity is a multifaceted concept that revolves around addressing the specific needs of disadvantaged or vulnerable groups to foster their personal and societal well-being. Ensuring equitable access to quality education is crucial for building inclusive societies and promoting equal opportunities for all.

Equitable education refers to providing quality education that caters to the diverse needs of students. Equity is often understood as ensuring equal treatment or distribution to all individuals, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or religion, which often collapses with the meaning of equality. This limited understanding fails to capture the full scope of equity and its various dimensions. It is very crucial to note that equity is different from equality. Equity must be understood as recognizing the unique needs of individuals and allocating appropriate time and resources to address those needs based on their capabilities. This approach is considered more effective than simply aiming for equal distribution without considering the specific requirements and personal heterogeneities of each individual. This study employs Sen's capability approach in general and Unterhalter's approach to examining equity in particular. In doing so, it aims to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of educational equity at different levels, namely below, above, and middle, as proposed by Elaine Unterhalter (2009). These dimensions of equity are interconnected and aligned with the concept of diversity within capability approach developed by Amartya Sen. All three dimensions of equity play a crucial role in enhancing individuals' capabilities within the realm of education. This research focuses on individuals belonging to different social

backgrounds, genders, and religions residing in Yamunamai Rural Municipality (YRM) and Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality (DRM) within the Rautahat district of Nepal. The study specifically concentrates on the basic education provided in public schools, which encompasses education up to grade 8.

According to Sen (2000), basic education catalyzes social change as it aids in addressing traditional inequalities based on caste, class, and gender. Equitable quality education is founded upon the provision of basic education, which aims to combat educational disparities. Inequity poses a significant threat, as it can impede an individual's opportunities and capabilities for development. Without access to basic education, individuals may struggle to exercise their rights and face challenges in claiming available opportunities.

This research endeavors to undertake a comprehensive assessment of equity among students in public schools in the Rautahat District, employing a multi-level analysis that encompasses perspectives from above (policy level), middle (school level), and below (student level). Educational equity transcends the notion of mere equality; it encompasses a fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and support systems to address the unique needs and challenges faced by students from different backgrounds. Recognizing the importance of equity in education, various policies and programs have been implemented to bridge the educational divide and promote inclusivity within the public school system. The study begins by mapping the existing plans, policies, and programs that promote educational equity in rural public schools at the macro level.

After all, understanding the framework of equity measures at the policy level is crucial for identifying the scope and effectiveness of initiatives aimed at reducing disparities among students. In addition to mapping policies and programs, this study will delve into the school-level equity plans, programs, and strategies implemented in public schools. This includes assessing the availability of resources for fostering an equitable environment and the implementation of inclusive practices that cater to the diverse needs of students. Evaluating the effectiveness of specific equitable plans, programs, and practices implemented at the individual student level is an integral part of this research. The assessment of student satisfaction and experiences is used to understand the extent to which these initiatives have provided equitable opportunities to students from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, this research seeks to explore students' perspectives on inclusivity and their experiences in accessing quality education within schools.

Overall, this research paper aims to provide an in-depth assessment of equity in public schools within the Rautahat District, focusing on the entire spectrum from policy implementation to classroom practices. By examining equity at multiple levels, including macro (policy), meso (school), and micro (individual), a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and factors influencing equity in education will be gained. The research will assess the overall effectiveness of equity initiatives in promoting educational equity among students from various backgrounds.

Additionally, this research aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations for improving equity in public schools in the Rautahat District. The findings of this study will contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies and interventions that foster equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances. Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to

the goal of building a more equitable and inclusive education system in the Rautahat District, setting a foundation for positive social change and development.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The issue of equity in education is widely discussed in the international debate, and it is recognized as a cross-cutting theme in Nepal's education system. However, there is a lack of clarity in writing on the nature of equity in education, and the use of the term "equity" in policy documents often lacks specific definitions and characteristics. In the Nepal education plan 2022-23-2031-32, policymakers have mistakenly used "equality" instead of "equity," and policymakers often use the term "equity" interchangeably with "equality" in policy documents, which might appear as a simple oversight. However, it is essential to recognize that there is a significant difference between the two concepts, and we should advocate for equity in education.

Education is considered a fundamental human right, and approximately six years ago, the Nepal Government declared education a fundamental right for all citizens. Nepal has committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, with a particular focus on SDG 4, which aims to ensure equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all.

However, despite these commitments, integrating equity in public schools still faces structural and social barriers, hindering the achievement of education for all on equal terms. The understanding of equity has expanded beyond ensuring access to schooling; it now also encompasses allocating resources and opportunities to equip students for success, acknowledging that some students require additional support.

Despite education being recognized as a fundamental right, achieving educational equity in rural public schools, especially in Rautahat District, remains a persistent challenge. The 2078 census data shows that Rautahat District has the lowest literacy rate of 57.75%, with a literacy rate of 66.2% for men and 49.48% for women. There is a lack of comprehensive research that holistically assesses the state of educational equity at three levels. While there are equity initiatives in place, the efficacy of these programs in fostering inclusivity and promoting equitable opportunities remains uncertain.

Nepal is a diverse country with people from various socio-cultural, economic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, making equity a significant issue, particularly in rural areas where inequities are prevalent. Inequities arise from factors such as caste, culture, income status, geography, ability, sex, and gender. The education system in Nepal also experiences inequality, particularly in public education, where schools cater to diverse populations, leading to disparities within these institutions. The problem at the macro level is the presence of systemic barriers and inequalities perpetuated by government policies, funding mechanisms, and administrative practices. The lack of equitable policies and practices hinders the provision of quality education and limits the educational advancement of marginalized students. This research aims to address this gap by conducting a multi-level analysis of educational equity in public schools in Rautahat District. The study will map existing policies and programs at the macro level, examine school-level equity initiatives, explore students' perspectives on inclusivity and experiences, and evaluate the effectiveness of specific equitable plans and programs to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing educational equity in the district.

The government has implemented various plans and policies to improve the education sector and increase school enrollment. However, retaining students in education remains challenging, particularly for marginalized groups such as poor, remote, and low-caste families, as well as disadvantaged ethnicities who face persistent access gaps. Slow policy implementation and a lack of effective actors further impede the achievement of education goals and widen the gap between education and its beneficiaries.

In this study, equity has been measured on the basis of the Equity Index developed by the Department of Education in Nepal, which identifies disparities in educational outcomes. However, the current dimensions of equity in education do not effectively measure equity or inequity at a micro level that focuses on human heterogeneity. To bridge this gap, interconnected dimensions that can limit measurement and yield more effective results are needed. Unterhalter's dimensions of equity from below, above, and middle are considered appropriate in this study as they are linked to capabilities, and they analyze equity in terms of rules (above), participation (below), and the flow of ideas or resources (middle), providing a comprehensive representation of equity. This holistic approach can identify the needs of diverse students.

This research aims to identify the challenges and barriers hindering the achievement of educational equity and propose evidence-based recommendations to inform policymakers, school administrators, and stakeholders. By addressing the complexities of equity issues in the district's public schools, we hope to contribute to the formulation of targeted interventions that create a more inclusive, just, and equitable educational environment for all students. Ultimately, addressing the problem of educational disparities and fostering educational equity is crucial to nurturing a thriving generation that can actively contribute to the social, economic, and cultural development of Rautahat District and beyond.

1.3 Objective of the Study

General objectives

The general objective of this research is to assess and understand educational equity in rural public schools in the Rautahat District at multiple levels: above (policy level), middle (school level), and below (student level).

Specific Objectives:

- To map existing plans, policies, and programs that promote educational equity in rural public schools.
- To examine school-level equity programs, plans, and strategies aimed at achieving equity in public schools.
- To assess the overall effectiveness of equity programs and strategies in promoting educational equity among students from diverse backgrounds at the individual level.
- To explore students' perspectives on inclusivity and experiences accessing quality education within schools.

1.4 Research questions

The research question of the study is as follows:

- What are the existing plans, policies, and programs in place to promote educational equity in rural public schools?
- What specific equity programs, plans, and strategies have been implemented at the school level to achieve educational equity in public schools?
- How effective are the implemented equity programs and strategies in fostering educational equity among students from diverse backgrounds at the individual level?
- What are the perspectives of students regarding inclusivity and their experiences accessing quality education within schools?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study focuses on exploring equity and inequity in public education in rural Nepal, aiming to identify barriers that hinder diverse students in public schools from achieving educational well-being. The government has implemented equity policies in public schools to cater to the needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, providing free basic education, mid-day meals, scholarships, and textbooks based on inclusive and equitable policies. Emphasizing the importance of evaluating public education in Nepal, the study seeks to understand the state of equity in education, considering that the majority of equity policies are directed toward public education. The primary contribution of this research also lies in its clarification of key terminology, specifically the differentiation between equity and equality. The research highlights the misuse of these terms in policy documents and seeks to rectify this issue. This clarification not only enhances the precision of policy formulation but also facilitates the development of educational practices that cater to the diverse needs of students.

Studying educational equity in rural public schools in the Rautahat District has multifaceted implications. It serves as a critical channel for addressing fundamental issues and creating positive transformations in the education system. Through the application of a multi-level analytical approach, the research demonstrates its commitment to in-depth exploration and comprehensive understanding. The dedication of this study to promoting equitable education is aligned with Nepal's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes equitable, inclusive, and high-quality education for all. Through meticulous mapping of existing plans, programs, and strategies, the research lays the foundation for targeted improvements that are grounded in evidence. This targeted approach addresses the distinct challenges faced by marginalized communities, ensuring that education becomes a tool for empowerment. It upholds the right to education for all individuals, irrespective of their social background, caste culture, gender, or ethnicity. By identifying factors contributing to educational disparities, the study can inform strategies promoting equal access to quality education and hold broader societal implications, as education is crucial for economic development and reducing inequalities.

The findings can guide policymakers and educators in addressing challenges specific to rural communities and formulating targeted policies. Additionally, the study provides insights into students' experiences and needs, leading to tailored interventions and a

more inclusive learning environment. It contributes to existing knowledge on educational equity in rural areas by analyzing the unique dynamics and complexities involved. The findings and recommendations serve as a valuable resource for future researchers and scholars interested in similar contexts or interventions to promote educational equity in rural settings. Ultimately, the study has the potential to create positive change and establish a more equitable educational environment for all students in the district.

1.6 Limitations of Study

While the research aims to provide valuable insights into educational equity in public schools of the Rautahat District, it is essential to acknowledge the potential limitations that may impact the study's findings and interpretations. Some of the limitations include:

- **Generalizability:** Since the study concentrates on a specific geographic area, the findings may not be entirely applicable to other regions or countries with distinct social, cultural, and educational contexts.
- **Language Barrier:** Conducting research in a culturally diverse context like Nepal necessitates a profound understanding of cultural norms. Language barriers may have hindered students' responsiveness and their participation in questionnaires and discussions.
- **Sample Size and Representation:** The study's sample size is limited to two municipalities, Yamunamai and Durga Bhagwati rural municipalities of the Rautahat district, due to practical constraints. As a result, the findings might not fully represent the entire population of students and schools in the Rautahat District.

Literature Review

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the concepts of equality, equity, inequality, and inequity and explores how the capability approach can be applied to measure equity in education. It delves into the historical development of equality and equity, examining various perspectives from ancient philosophers to contemporary thinkers. The capability approach is introduced as a theoretical framework that emphasizes individual freedoms and well-being, with a focus on the ability to achieve valuable goals. The chapter highlights the role of education in enhancing capabilities and promoting social development. It critiques conventional approaches to equality and introduces the concept of basic capability equality. The capability approach's alignment with equity is discussed, emphasizing fair distribution, addressing vulnerabilities, and promoting preferential treatment for disadvantaged groups. The chapter also presents an overview of equity in education in the context of Nepal, highlighting dimensions of equity and policy measures to promote equitable access and opportunities. Furthermore, the chapter explores different conceptual frameworks for measuring equity and the challenges of achieving educational equity. Overall, the chapter stresses the importance of embracing diversity and promoting equitable outcomes in education to create an equitable and inclusive society.

2.1 Understanding concepts of equality, equity, inequality, and inequity

2.1.1 Equality

The concept of equality has been developed by several philosophers, thinkers, and activists throughout history and has evolved and taken on different meanings and interpretations over time depending on the social, cultural, and political context. Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, explored the concept of equality in terms of treating similar people similarly, arguing that justice involves treating equals equally. (*Politics*, Book V). Similarly, the concept of legal equality originated in ancient Rome through the concept of equal protection under the law (Radin, M. 1923).

During the European Enlightenment, philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocated for the natural equality of all individuals as well as the idea that governments should be established with the consent of the governed (Arneil, B. 2006). Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer and feminist, advocated for equal education for men and said that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men (Wollstonecraft, M. 1792). Rawlsian equality refers to the concept of equality that is based on the theory of justice proposed by philosopher John Rawls, which

emphasizes the importance of ensuring that all individuals have equal basic liberties as well as a fair distribution of social and economic resources that benefits the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, J. 1971).

Whereas, utilitarian equality refers to the idea that equality is attained when everyone in society experiences an equal level of happiness or well-being, as measured by the total amount of utility or happiness they experience (Mill, J. S. 1861). This means that everyone's happiness is weighted equally and aggregated to determine the overall level of equality in society. According to the capability approach, equality entails more than simply equalizing resources or opportunities; it also entails ensuring that individuals can use those resources and opportunities to achieve their goals and live fulfilled lives (Nussbaum, M. C. 2011). The struggle for social and political equality gained impetus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with movements such as the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and civil rights organizations advocating for equal treatment and rights for underprivileged groups (Skrentny, J. D. (2002).

In the twentieth century, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, which recognized equality as a fundamental human right and called for the equal treatment of all individuals regardless of race, gender, religion, or other personal characteristics (United Nations, 1948). Throughout history, the concept of equality has been defined and understood with an emphasis on equal treatment, natural rights, social contract theory, moral principles, and political ends (Freeman, S. 2013). In contemporary society, equality has been redefined to include not just legal equality but also social and economic equality. The fundamental principle of equality is that people should not be treated differently based on any identity with which they identify or which is ascribed to them, such as their race, gender, gender identity, class, language, religion, age, sexual orientation, national origin, birth status, disability, and so on.

2.1.2 Equity

The concept of equity emerged as an advanced form of equality by recognizing that different individuals or groups may have different needs and require different treatment to achieve a fair and equitable outcome. While conventional notions of equality place a strong emphasis on treating everyone equally, equity understands that true equality may require varied treatment to take into account varying needs and circumstances (McLeod, S. A. 2017). Throughout history, there have been different definitions of equity, reflecting changing social and political contexts and priorities.

In ancient Greece, the concept of equity (or *epieikeia*) was closely related to the idea of justice and referred to the ability to apply the law fairly and justly in individual cases, even if the law itself was imperfect or incomplete (Aristotle, c. 350 BC).

During the Enlightenment, the concept of equity was linked to the idea of natural rights and reflected a growing emphasis on individual liberty and freedom. Locke, J. 1690). John Rawls (1971), a political philosopher, defined equity as the principle of justice that requires the fair distribution of benefits and burdens among members of society. He argued that a just society maximizes the well-being of the least advantaged members of society and that policies and institutions should be designed to promote this goal. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, defined equity as the principle of justice that requires treating individuals as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. He argued that treating individuals with respect and dignity is essential for achieving

justice and equity (Kant, I., 1785). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the concept of equity was closely associated with the idea of social justice and was often used in discussions of labor rights, workers' compensation, and other social welfare programs (Pogge, T. 2001).

During this period, there was a growing recognition of the need to address inequality and exploitation in society, and the concept of equity was seen as a way to promote fairness and justice. In the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, the concept of equity took on a more specific meaning related to race and racial justice (Klugman, J. 2016). Equity was seen as a way to address the historical and systemic disadvantages that African Americans and other people of color had faced and was often invoked in discussions of affirmative action, busing, and other policies designed to promote equal access to opportunities and resources.

In recent years, the concept of equity has been closely linked to issues of diversity, inclusion, and representation, particularly in the workplace and other organizational contexts. The United Nations defines equity as the fair distribution of economic, social, and environmental benefits and burdens across society, emphasizing the importance of addressing inequality and promoting social justice for sustainable development (UNDP, 2021). The emphasis has shifted from promoting equality of opportunity to promoting equality of outcome, with prominence placed on ensuring that all individuals and groups, regardless of background or identity, have equal access to resources and opportunities. Therefore, equity promotes fairness, justice, and impartiality to create a more just and fair society for all.

2.1.3 Inequality and Inequity

Inequality and inequity are complicated issues and pertain to far-reaching societal implications. These terminologies can mean different things to different individuals in different situations. Inequality and inequity are also used interchangeably since they are related concepts, but they are not synonymous. Inequality is defined as the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities within a community or group and can take many forms, including economic, social, gender, racial, and spatial inequality (Chen & Ravallion, 2019; Sen, 2009). According to Milanovic (2016) and Piketty (2014), many different variables contribute to inequality, including historical legacies, political institutions, globalization, and technical advancement.

Likewise, the Cambridge Dictionary defines inequality as an unjust situation in society where some individuals have greater opportunities, advantages, or benefits than others. The United Nations describes it as a state where there is a lack of equality, particularly in terms of status, rights, and opportunities. The unequal and unjust distribution of resources and opportunities among members of a society is known as inequality. Contrarily, inequity refers to the outcome of structural and systemic disparities that result in unfair treatment and unequal access to opportunities and resources. The historical and institutional reasons that support discrimination against the marginalization of particular groups are frequently to blame for inequities (Braveman et al., 2017). For instance, patriarchal norms and ideals restricting women's access to resources like healthcare, education, and other resources are frequently responsible for gender disparities (Kabeer, 2010).

Similarly, historical and current forms of discrimination, such as discrimination and unequal access to opportunities for education and employment, frequently contribute

to racial disparities (Jones et al., 2019). Inequity is not just about differences, but about unfair and avoidable differences that can be resolved through deliberate efforts to address the core causes of the disparities (Lantz et al., 2016). Inequity is a normative term that involves a moral judgment on the fairness or justice of disparities, whereas inequality is a descriptive term that describes disparities (Whitehead et al., 2020).

In simpler terms, the unequal allocation of resources, opportunities, and benefits in society is referred to as inequality, whereas inequity refers to a lack of fairness and justice in the distribution of resources, opportunities, and rewards. Inequality and inequity are problematic issues because they can result in economic and social disparities as well as stifle social mobility and opportunities for marginalized groups. Inequalities in income, education, and health outcomes have been demonstrated in research to have a negative influence on individuals and communities (Marmot et al., 2020). Many factors can contribute to inequality and eventually inequity, including economic, social, political, and spatial factors. It is vital to highlight that these elements are frequently interconnected and can reinforce one another, producing a vicious circle of inequality and inequity.

2.2 Understanding the capability approach and its intersection with education, equality, and equity

2.2.1 The Capability Approach

The capability approach was introduced by Sen in the 1980s, and this approach has been continuously developed in his subsequent work over the next three decades (Sen, A. 1999). The capability approach is firmly entrenched in the social choice tradition and the liberal school of philosophy (Alkire, S. 2005). It examines the freedom and choices available to people in achieving a 'good life' and the obstacles that hinder them from doing so. The capability approach builds on welfare economics and utilitarian approaches that attempt to measure quality of life but goes further by providing a comprehensive way of assessing the current and potential capabilities of individuals (Sen, A. 1993). The capability approach is a theoretical framework that evaluates the well-being of individuals and the societal arrangements that support them based on the opportunities available to them to achieve valuable outcomes, which he refers to as capabilities (Robeyns, I. 2005).

Moreover, Sen's definition of capabilities goes beyond material possessions and incorporates social, economic, and political factors that can either enable or constrain an individual's ability to attain their goals (Sen, A. 1993). The capability approach prioritizes personal agency, freedom of choice, social justice, and the removal of institutional barriers to ensure that individuals can exercise their capabilities to lead a life that they value and have reason to value (Sen, A. 1999). The two basic concepts within the framework of the capability approach are capabilities and functioning's. Sen defines capability as "a person's ability to perform valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; it represents the alternative combinations of things "a person is able to do or be " (Sen, A. 1993). Thus, capabilities are opportunities or freedoms to attain what an individual finds worthwhile in retrospect. Sen (1999) defines capabilities as "the substantive freedoms a person enjoys to live the kind of life he or she has reason to value.

Functioning refers to the various activities and states that are considered valuable by an individual in terms of their well-being (Sen, A. 1999). These may include being healthy, well-nourished, safe, educated, having a good job, and being able to visit loved ones, among others. In simpler terms, functionings are the things a person values doing or being that contribute to their overall sense of well-being. As per the capability approach, individuals must have the freedom to pursue their aspirations and experience a satisfying life while having the capability to make significant choices and act upon them (Alkire, S. 2005). A significant attribute of this approach is its emphasis on individual capabilities, which refers to the actual prospects that individuals have to achieve their objectives and enjoy a satisfying life (Robeyns, I. 2005).

The significance of capabilities lies in the fact that they enable individuals to make independent choices and pursue their personal goals, thus promoting human development (Nussbaum, M. 2011). The capability approach also recognizes the importance of agency, which is the capacity of individuals to make choices and act upon them to accomplish their goals (Robeyns, I. 2005). The approach suggests that agency is vital for promoting human development as it allows individuals to shape their lives and make decisions that matter to them (Sen, A. 1999).

Freedom is another key feature of the capability approach, as it is considered critical to enabling individuals to pursue their goals and lead a contented life (Nussbaum, M. 2011). According to this approach, individuals should have the freedom to choose their paths in life without being constrained by external factors such as poverty, discrimination, a lack of access to healthcare, or education (Robeyns, I. 2005). The ability of someone to transform their resources and public goods into functions depends on various factors, including personal, sociopolitical, and environmental conditions referred to as “conversion factors” in the capability approach (Alkire, S. 2005).

Martha Nussbaum is also recognized as one of the primary contributors to developing theories within the capability approach. Nussbaum (2011) explains that the capability approach involves two key normative claims. Firstly, it asserts that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance. Secondly, it posits that well-being should be understood in terms of people's capabilities and functioning. This approach focuses on expanding people's choices and opportunities, enabling them to pursue a fulfilling life based on their preferences and values. Nussbaum has developed a list of “central human capabilities” that are crucial for establishing a “social minimum” and maintaining human dignity, whereas Sen did not provide a specific list of universal capabilities (Nussbaum, M. 2009). According to Nussbaum, these central capabilities include life, bodily health, bodily integrity, the senses, imagination and thought, emotions, play, other species, and control over one's environment both politically and materially. Nussbaum believes that a just society should guarantee these capabilities, as they are vital for human flourishing (Nussbaum, M. 2000).

Additionally, Nussbaum (2000) identifies practical reason and affiliation as two underlying capabilities that support all other capabilities. Practical reason refers to the ability to critically reflect on one's life and to form a conception of the good, while affiliation refers to the ability to engage in social interactions and to be treated with dignity and worth equal to others (Nussbaum, M. 2011). According to Norwich (2014), the main difference between Sen's and Nussbaum's approaches is that Sen prioritizes agency as the key aspect of capability, whereas Nussbaum views central capabilities as more of an entitlement than an active choice.

2.2.2 Capability Approach and Education

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum developed the capability approach, which provides a framework for comprehending human well-being that goes beyond economic measures (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2000). This approach focuses on the significance of individuals' freedom to attain valued capabilities and functions. As a result, the capability approach has become popular in the education sector as a tool for evaluating and promoting educational quality, equity, and social justice (Robeyns, 2006). The capability approach places education at its core. Sen (1992) considers education one of the essential elements necessary for human well-being.

Both Sen and Nussbaum view education as a primary capability that has a significant impact on the development and expansion of other capabilities. This perspective prompts us to question the fairness of the distribution of valued capabilities through education. Who has greater opportunities to transform their resources into capabilities, and why? These questions emphasize the critical role that Sen (1999) attributes to education in the formation of human capabilities. Sen's capability approach categorizes basic capabilities as a subset of all capabilities, which are a small number of fundamental beings and doings that are essential for well-being (Sen, A. 1992). The ability to receive an education is among these fundamental capabilities. Sen emphasizes the contribution of education to the quality of life and the formation and enhancement of human capabilities in his analysis of development and poverty.

While Sen does not provide a definitive list of basic capabilities, he identifies several fundamental capabilities, including the capability to be sheltered, nourished, educated, and clothed (Sen, A. 1999). Sen (1999) contends that education has an instrumental social role in that critical literacy, for example, promotes public debate and dialogue regarding social and political structures. It plays a crucial role by extending the network of acquaintances and widening our horizons. Finally, it plays an empowering and distributive role in enabling impoverished, marginalized, and excluded people to organize politically. It has a redistributive impact on social groups, households, and families.

In general, education has interpersonal impacts because it enables people to use their advantages to benefit others, which promotes social justice and democratic freedoms. In essence, in Sen's view, "education" is an unequivocal benefit for enhancing human capability and promoting freedom. Similarly, Nussbaum has emphasized the importance of education in supporting women's empowerment and public education as a crucial component of democratic societies in her writings from 1997 to 2006. (Nussbaum, 1997, 2002, 2004, 2006).

In Nussbaum's view, education cultivates three crucial skills: critical thinking, or "the examined life," the concept of being a global citizen, and the growth of the narrative imagination. Both Sen and Nussbaum view education as a fundamental capability that plays a critical role in the growth and enhancement of other capabilities. Also, according to the capability approach, education should enable individuals to acquire a set of capabilities, such as critical thinking, communication skills, and civic engagement, that are required for pursuing valued functions such as a fulfilling job, democratic participation, or personal relationships (Nussbaum, 2000; Unterhalter, 2011).

As a result, the emphasis is not only on acquiring knowledge and skills but also on the development of individuals' agency and well-being. Several studies have used the

capacity approach in education to identify possible contributions to educational policy and practice. Robeyns (2006), for example, claimed that the capacity approach might provide a normative framework for evaluating educational policies and programs by examining their impact on the opportunities and outcomes of individuals. Unterhalter (2011) emphasized the significance of contextual elements such as gender, social class, and culture in influencing individuals' capabilities and educational prospects and proposed that the capacity approach can guide more inclusive and equitable educational policy.

2.2.3 Capability Approach and Equality

The question 'equality of what?' is often posed during debates on political philosophy and interdisciplinary debates on distributive justice. (Broderick, A. 2018). Amartya Sen, an economist-philosopher, raised the same question and introduced the concept of "basic capability equality" in his Tanner Lectures (Sen, A. 1979). According to Sen, the space within which to evaluate equality is that of capabilities, where an individual can decide what kind of life he or she values (Sen, A. 1992). Sen stated in describing the capabilities approach that neither utilitarian equality, total utility equality, nor Rawlsian equality represent actual disparities among individuals (Sen, 1979), as these theories typically assume that individuals are free, equal, and independent agents.

In his 1979 Tanner Lecture, 'Equality of What, delivered at Stanford University, Sen examines and critiques three conventional approaches to equality: utilitarian equality, total utility equality, and Rawlsian equality. Sen states that utilitarian equality is derived from a moral theory that attempts to enhance overall happiness or well-being (i.e., utility) in society. This requires considering the happiness of each member of society. According to utilitarian equality, each unit of a good or service should be allocated to deliver the same amount of additional happiness or utility to each person. Sen also discusses the criticisms of utilitarianism from philosopher John Rawls, who argues that utilitarianism contradicts the principles of liberty and equality.

Utilitarianism seeks to maximize the total utility for all, but it fails to take into account distributional inequalities or people's distinct needs and interests, which may perpetuate existing inequities or marginalize specific persons or groups. The idea of total utility equality stems from the concept of welfare equality.

Utilitarian equality and total utility equality are both welfare equality; however, utilitarian equality requires hypotheses about what things would have been like in different circumstances, whereas total utility equality is based on direct observation. Total utility equality is also constrained by the fact that it only refers to absolute equality and does not provide a comprehensive ordering of all utility distributions. Sen also outlines Rawls' two justice principles, which emphasize the need for equality based on "primary social goods," such as rights, liberties, income, and self-respect. Rawls' approach can accommodate objective criteria of well-being and avoid some of the pitfalls inherent in utilitarianism. However, he also points out shortcomings, including the fact that the primary goods approach ignores the diversity of human needs and overlooks real disparities.

Here, Sen argues that Rawls' framework has a "fetishism" towards primary goods, does not consider the relationship between persons and goods, and pays little attention to human diversity, overlooking real differences. He further questioned whether a theory of equality can be constructed based on Rawlsian equality and equality under two

Welfarist conceptions, with some trade-offs. He claims that the existing framework lacks a notion of “basic capabilities” a person's ability to do certain basic activities. Then, Sen proposes a different paradigm for thinking about equality, which he refers to as “basic capability equality,” emphasizing the importance of building individual capabilities and empowering individuals to pursue a life they have reason to value. The concept of capability equality recognizes human diversity as an important element in assessing relative disadvantages and combating inequality. People’s needs, demands, and interests vary depending on a variety of conditions, and basic capability equality deals with the pervasive inter-individual differences between people. It also focuses on an individual's actual ability to make use of the goods, services, and opportunities that are accessible to them.

Amartya Sen's theory of basic capability Equality is a normative framework that focuses on the capabilities of individuals and their ability to lead fulfilling lives (Sen, 1999). According to the capability approach, equality entails more than simply equalizing resources or opportunities; it involves ensuring that individuals have the ability to use those resources and opportunities to achieve their goals and live fulfilling lives (Robeyns, I. 2006). According to Comim et al. (2008), the capability approach argues that equality should be evaluated in terms of capabilities. This means that the main focus in achieving justice should be on providing equal opportunities to expand an individual's capabilities.

2.2.4 Capability Approach and Equity

Equity is commonly defined as the quality of being equal and fair (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007). When we talk about equity, it cannot be separated from fairness and justice. It is related to but different from the concept of equality, so equity can be seen as an evolution of equality. In essence, it is the transformation of equality into an actionable process for creating fairness. Smith and Gorard (2006) view equity as both just and fair, as well as the process that underpins the system's fairness. Fiske and Ladd (2005) describe equity in South Africa as equal treatment for all races, equal educational opportunities, and adequacy. All these definitions make it very unclear why equity is preferable to equality in providing a foundation for fairness.

Seeing equity primarily as a fair distribution opens these discussions to the critique posed by Sen (1992) regarding what the metric of interpersonal comparison in discussions of equality is to be. Sen questions whether having access to resources, such as free schools and free textbooks, is enough for individuals to achieve a valued state of being. He argues that resources can provide a means to achieve a valued way of living, but they cannot guarantee that an individual will be able to utilize them in the most effective way. Sen shifts attention from the commodity space to the space of what a person can do or be, or what kind of life a person can lead. The capability approach provides a different perspective on equity than the traditional understanding of fairness in distributions, rather than necessarily equalizing outcomes.

The capability approach emphasizes individual freedom and development and recognizes the importance of equity in promoting social justice (Sen, A. 1999). According to the capability approach, equity is not just about equal distribution of resources but also about ensuring that everyone has the capability to pursue their life goals (Robeyns, I. 2017). The capability approach foregrounds the basic heterogeneity of human beings as a fundamental aspect, which makes it closer to the venture of

equity. Nussbaum (2011) emphasizes the importance of addressing vulnerabilities, such as those related to gender, race, and disability, which can limit people's capabilities and opportunities. Equity draws attention to those who have unequal opportunities due to various disadvantages and may require preferential treatment or affirmative action. For example, the poor, differently abled, women, ethnic minorities, and other disadvantaged sections of the population may need special measures to enable them to have the same level of capabilities. By addressing these vulnerabilities, it is possible to promote greater equity and expand people's capabilities.

The capability approach seems suitable to measure equity as it focuses on what it will take for people to be enabled to have equal options of choice with similarly achieved functioning when they opt to do so. Furthermore, the capability approach can be used to define the level of choices people will need to have in order to establish the minimum enabling conditions for quality education, as anything beyond these conditions would also fulfill that. This approach recognizes that different people have different starting points and face different challenges that can limit their capabilities and opportunities. Additionally, the capability approach also recognizes personal heterogeneity in social and historical attributes and conditions, as well as differences regarding conceptions of the good.

2.2.5 Moving from Equality to Equity

Equity and equality are contested terms; although, terminologically, 'equity' and 'equality' sound similar, conceptually, 'equity' and 'equality' are completely different from one another. Moreover, the difference between equity and equality helps us understand the notions of social justice, social equity, social inclusion, racial justice, and social security. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), equity is defined as "the absence of avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically. The International Bill of Human Rights defines equity as a condition in which society is characterized by justice, equality, impartiality, and fairness, including a fair and equal distribution of power, economic resources, opportunities, goods, and services across the social spectrum.

The transition from equality to equity has generated greater awareness of the need to address societal gaps, disparities, and inequities. In education, for example, the emphasis has switched from equal access to education to ensuring that all students have an equitable chance to succeed (Liu, X. 2017). According to Nash, Reifsnyder, and Fabius (2018), there has been a change in the healthcare industry toward ensuring equitable access to care, particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. The recognition that treating everyone the same does not always result in equal outcomes, as people have different starting positions and encounter different barriers, has also contributed to this transition (Walter, C. 2017).

Equity, unlike equality, is grounded in recognizing and embracing the diversity of humanity. While equality seeks to achieve an even distribution, equal access, and fair treatment for all, equity focuses on ensuring that individuals can convert the resources provided to them into equitable outcomes. Since people have varying capacities to reach the same level of achievement, the allocation of resources may need to be unequal to address their unique needs. Equity can be considered the evolution of equality.

Equality means treating everyone the same, whereas equity requires giving everyone what they need. In the context of education, it shows that giving people equal resources (the same number of textbooks or mid-day meals) does not guarantee that they will all reach equal outcomes (sufficient need); in this way, it argues that equity means everyone reaches equal outcomes.

2.3 Equity in education

Equity is based on the foundation of human diversity. Rather than providing the same to all, it focuses on the outcome of people being able to convert what is provided to them into equal outcomes. The discussion about equity in education encompasses diverse interpretations and is strongly connected to varying viewpoints on rights and social justice (Castelli, Ragazzi, & Crescentini, 2012). The first use of the term “equity” was in relation to the importance recognized by several countries in 1990 for integrating the terms equity and quality regarding the availability of education in all nations. Since 2004, many more countries have joined this endeavor. (Moreno-Guerrero et al., 2020).

Benadusi (2006) discusses the historical focus of the scholastic system debate, highlighting the concepts of efficacy and efficiency in the 1960s and 1970s, quality in the 1980s and 1990s, and finally, the emergence of the equity approach in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Benadusi provides a comprehensive summary of the various interpretations of equity, encompassing six distinct concepts: pure meritocracy, equal treatment, inter-individual equality, minimum threshold, equality between social groups (or of opportunities), and advantages for the disadvantaged. Maitzegui-Onate and Santibanez-Gruber (2008) discuss different conceptions of equity in education, including opportunity or legally recognized rights, access to school, treatment or educational models and measures, and results or opportunity for success. (OECD, 2018) defines equity in education as providing equal opportunities for all students to achieve the same levels of academic success, psychological development, and social well-being regardless of socioeconomic background such as class, caste, gender, geography, language, religion, and so on.

According to UNESCO, equity in education means that “every child and young individual has access to a high-quality education that meets their requirements, is free from discrimination, and enables them to attain their full potential” (UNESCO, 2021). Equity in education means that students with special needs, such as Down syndrome, mental retardation, autistic students, and slow learners, should be fully incorporated into the school (Majzub, R. 2013). Equity implies that students should have equal opportunities to attain their full potential, regardless of their community background or dispositional characteristics. While there is an ample amount of literature on educational equality, there is less conceptual writing on the nature of educational equity. Equity is used more frequently than equality in policy documents, but often without precise meaning (Unterhalter, E. 2009). It is very important to distinguish the space of equity from equality because equality entails treating everyone the same, whereas equity entails providing everyone with what they require.

2.4 Equity in the Context of Nepal

2.4.1 Diversity and Inequity

Nepal is a country with a diverse population consisting of various linguistic, cultural, caste, and ethnic groups living in different regions. The diversity in Nepal is due to the presence of various caste and ethnic groups, regions, and communities that have distinct social and cultural traditions, customs, and practices. The 2021 census revealed that Nepal has a population of

2,91,64,578, comprising individuals from 126 different castes and ethnic groups who communicate using 123 languages (CBS, 2021).

This diversity is a representation of Nepal's identity and potential, but it has also led to social, economic, and political discrimination and disadvantages for certain communities based on their traditional differences. Historically, communities such as Dalits, marginalized groups, ethnic communities, and linguistic minorities have faced discrimination and disadvantages. These deprivations have had a significant impact on their access, participation, and attainment in education.

The effects of geographical, economic, and gender-based marginalization can also be observed in the varying levels of educational access, participation, and attainment. Efforts need to be made to ensure that children with disabilities and vulnerable children have access to and can participate in education. It is essential to ensure that education is easily accessible, inclusive, and equitable for everyone, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or religion. The greater the diversity within the population, the higher the likelihood of experiencing inequity, discrepancies, and exclusion. There is a need to ensure that everyone has easy access to education and can participate in it meaningfully despite their gender, ethnicity, and religion.

2.4.2 Dimensions of equity and inequality in Nepal

Nepal is a country that is known for its significant social and cultural diversity. The diversity in Nepal is due to the presence of various caste and ethnic groups, regions, and communities that have distinct social and cultural traditions, customs, and practices. The presence of such diversity in Nepal has led to the development of a unique cultural landscape that is rich in traditions, customs, and practices.

The diversity of Nepal is celebrated and cherished by its people, and it is an important part of the country's national identity. However, the diversity in Nepalese society has also resulted in societal hierarchies that have marginalized certain groups of people, resulting in high levels of inequity within the country where some groups of people are marginalized. These inequities are not limited to the broader societal context but are also prominent within the education system, where certain groups and communities face systemic barriers that hinder their access to equitable, quality education and educational opportunities.

The focal dimensions of inequity and equity in education that have been identified include gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, health and nutritional status, disabilities, caste and ethnicity, language, and children from vulnerable groups. This dimension of equity perpetuates disparity, leading to a cycle of marginalization and inequity, making it difficult for these groups to break out of poverty and improve their socio-economic status.

Caste/ethnicity and linguistic background: The differences in access and participation in school education among different groups of people are influenced by various factors, including caste/ethnicity and linguistic background. Caste refers to a social hierarchy system where opportunities in life are determined by the group one is born into. Ethnic background, which relates to cultural and ancestral heritage, can impact education access if the culture is not well represented in the education system. Similarly, linguistic background, or the languages a person speaks, can affect their ability to access education if the language of instruction is not their first language. These factors can create disparities in education, leading to unequal outcomes and opportunities for various groups.

Gender: Gender is one of the dimensions of equity in Nepal because there are significant disparities in access, participation, and learning outcomes between boys and girls in the education sector. The National Census 2078 BS report also highlights that there is a significant gender disparity in literacy rates, with the male literacy rate being 83.6 percent and the female literacy rate being 69.4 percent. It has been recognized that women and girls historically face significant disadvantages and discrimination in various aspects of life, including education, health, employment, and participation in decision-making processes. Gender-based inequities are deeply ingrained in social norms, cultural practices, and traditional beliefs in many societies, including Nepal.

Disability: Disability is considered one of the dimensions of equity in Nepal, as children with disabilities encounter considerable obstacles in accessing education and participating in learning activities. The lack of disability-friendly infrastructure, inclusive curriculum, and support services further exacerbates the exclusion, inequity, and discrimination faced by students with disabilities in various aspects of life, including education. The absence of accessible infrastructure can limit their physical access to educational institutions, while the lack of an inclusive curriculum may not cater to their diverse learning needs. Additionally, the absence of support services, such as assistive technologies, special education teachers, and counseling, can hinder their educational progress and overall well-being.

Children from vulnerable groups: The term “children from vulnerable groups” refers to several children who are exposed to particular behaviors that make them more vulnerable and may make it difficult for them to attend school. The vulnerable groups include street children, survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking, orphan children, and sick children who face enormous barriers to accessing education due to limited resources, discrimination, and health issues. It is crucial to address these disparities and tackle broader social and economic factors like poverty and inequality, which make them more vulnerable.

Geographical location: Geographic location is a crucial factor in determining the availability and accessibility of essential services, such as employment, schools, and healthcare facilities, within a country like Nepal. It also relates to the specific characteristics of urban versus non-urban, rural, or remote areas and their impact on equity areas, including access to public services and opportunities for livelihoods like

forestry or agriculture. Nepal's diverse geography, ranging from snow-capped mountains to subtropical regions in the Terai, creates significant variations in livelihood and educational opportunities for its people. These disparities extend to family, household, community, and school levels, affecting overall equity and access to services.

Health and nutritional status: nutrition and health Status is a very essential component of inequity in Nepal because this factor creates challenges for children to survive, grow, and learn. Early childhood malnutrition has long-term consequences for learning ability and mental development. In Nepal, nearly half of all children under five are underdeveloped, affecting their physical and mental growth irreversibly. Nutrition is closely linked to socioeconomic status, where limited resources lead to insufficient dietary diversity for children. Gender and cultural restrictions also play a role in health and nutrition disparities. Limited economic resources negatively impact children's health, leaving them without adequate nutrition and affecting their overall well-being.

Socio-economic status: Poverty is more than just a problem of income; instead, it is a general lack of access to fundamental requirements (including education), including housing, health care, empowerment, employment, personal security, etc. Socio-economic status is considered an important dimension of equity or inequality in Nepal because it plays a significant role in determining access to resources, opportunities, and overall well-being within society. It is closely linked to factors such as income, education, occupation, and access to basic services like healthcare and education. In Nepal, as in many other countries, there are significant disparities between different socio-economic groups. Those with higher socioeconomic status typically have better access to quality education, healthcare, and job opportunities, while those with lower socioeconomic status face more challenges and barriers in accessing these essential services and opportunities. These disparities in socio-economic status can perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality, as individuals and communities with lower socio-economic status may struggle to break free from the constraints imposed by their circumstances.

2.4.3 Equity in Nepal's Policy Context

These are some of the policy measures, plans, and programs that have been implemented in Nepal to ensure equity in education.

Constitution of Nepal: The right to education stated in Article 31 of the Nepalese Constitution is one of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of Nepal. It places a focus on the provision of free and compulsory education up to the primary level and ensures that all people have equal access to education without any forms of discrimination. The clause guarantees every citizen the right to access basic education, the right to receive basic education from the state, the right to receive free secondary education, the right to receive free higher education in accordance with the law for the disabled and economically disadvantaged, and the right of every Nepali community living in Nepal.

Consolidate the Equality Strategy for Nepal: In Nepal, equity is analyzed as a key parameter to measure the development of the educational system of a country. Addressing the need for strengthening equity in education, the Government of Nepal has developed the Consolidated Equity Strategy for the School Education Sector, which was launched in December 2014. The main objectives of this strategy are to reduce the current disparities in (i) access and participation and (ii) learning outcomes for children in basic and secondary public education in Nepal. The purpose of the Equity Index is to account for children's opportunities for school education as well as the equality of opportunity across children facing different circumstances or contexts. The equity index is intended to be the core planning and monitoring tool for the full-fledged implementation of the Consolidated Equity Strategy and is planned to be used to target the most disadvantaged districts for specific interventions. The aim is to ultimately provide tools that can be used at the district, VDC, and school levels.

Education for All National Plan of Action (EFA, NPA): The Dakar Framework for Action for Education for All (2000) is a global initiative that aims to provide education to all individuals, regardless of their social or economic background. The National Plan of Action for Education for All of Nepal was developed in response to the Dakar Declaration to expand access to education for all children in Nepal. It aims to ensure access to quality education for all Nepali citizens, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background. The plan sets targets and strategies for achieving universal primary education, improving literacy rates, and reducing disparities in education. The plan emphasized the importance of inclusive education, which means providing education to children who were previously excluded from the education system due to various reasons such as poverty, disability, or social status. Inclusive education aims to ensure that all children have equal opportunities to learn and develop their skills, regardless of their background or circumstances. The National Plan of Action for Education for All of Nepal recognized the importance of inclusive education in achieving the goal of providing education for all children and included strategies to expand access to education and promote inclusive practices in schools.

School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP): The School Reform Plan (2009–2015) is a comprehensive plan aimed at improving the quality, equity, and efficiency of basic education in Nepal. It focuses on areas such as access to education, teacher training, curriculum development, school infrastructure, and governance. The essence of this plan is to improve access, equity, quality, and relevance of secondary education, expand free secondary education, and promote equitable participation in all aspects of secondary education. The SSRP focuses on incorporating diversity, indigenous culture, and language into education and identifying individual learning needs. The promotion of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction is a key focus in basic education, aiming to offer non-formal learning opportunities for both children and adults. This program prioritizes gender equality, particularly among marginalized girls and women, to ensure equitable participation and outcomes. Emphasis is placed on enhancing the quality of education, including refining the learning environment and process.

The SSRP is dedicated to enhancing institutional capacity for effective reform implementation by categorizing education into basic (grades one to eight) and secondary (grades nine to twelve), along with distinct streams for vocational education. The program emphasizes a rights-based approach, inclusive education,

technical education, and gender equality. Overall, the plan highlights the importance of equity in education and the need for effective and efficient schools to achieve this goal.

School Sector Development Plan (SSDP): The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) is a comprehensive plan that aims to improve the quality of education in Nepal. The plan focuses on the three pillars of access, inclusion, and quality and aims to provide options and accredited learning pathways for students between technical and general secondary education without compromising quality. The plan also aims to strengthen institutional links and facilitate the transition to higher education, preparing students to uphold and fulfill their civic duties. The plan recognizes the diverse group of stakeholders in terms of culture, context, and needs, including students with different first languages. The plan has implications for equity as it aims to reduce disparities in education by operationalizing the Equity Index within the Education Management Information System (EMIS) at all levels to inform the government's central and decentralized planning and budgeting processes on reducing disparities. The plan also aims to address the lower proficiency in Nepali among students with a first language other than Nepali, which can contribute to more equitable access to education. The plan recognizes the importance of providing education to all students, regardless of their background, and aims to provide equal opportunities for all.

School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032): The School Education Sector Plan 2022/23-2031/32 of Nepal aims to ensure equitable access to and participation in a full school education cycle for all children, including those from socially and economically disadvantaged groups and children with disabilities. The plan recognizes the complexities of Nepal's context in terms of its geographical, demographic, social, cultural, and economic features and subscribes to several international conventions and declarations related to the education of women and persons with disabilities. The plan presents various strategies and processes to achieve equity and inclusion in school education, such as providing free school education for all, strengthening the scholarship system, implementing the Consolidated Equity Strategy, undertaking school mapping of education services, implementing the Inclusive Education Road Map, providing basic health and nutrition services and education, improving the physical and educational environments of schools, and ensuring children's right to education. The plan also recommends restructuring and arranging the structures of implementation and management in line with the federal structure, establishing action-oriented structures, and providing human resources as required. The plan aims to develop a capable, well-governed, accountable, and competitive public school education system that ensures citizens' right to acquire relevant and quality education comparable to regional and international standards while reducing existing disparities based on gender, socio-economic status, disability, ethnicity, province or region, linguistic background, etc. in core education indicators. Therefore, the plan has the potential to have a significant impact on equity in education in Nepal by providing equal opportunities for all children to access education and achieve their full potential, regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, or other factors.

2.5 Different conceptual frameworks for measuring equity

2.5.1 UNESCO framework for measuring equity

The UNESCO conceptual framework for equity in education is centered on the distribution of educational opportunities and resources. It comprises five key concepts, each of which plays a role in understanding and measuring equity in education. These concepts include meritocracy, minimum standards, impartiality, gap difference, ratio, co-variation, concentration, and group-level cumulative information. The UNESCO framework for measuring equity in education comprises several key concepts, each playing a role in understanding and evaluating equity in educational opportunities and outcomes.

Meritocracy: Meritocracy advocates distributing educational opportunities based on individual merit while considering relevant differences among students. For instance, offering extra classes to academically weak students and providing scholarships to financially disadvantaged students helps achieve a fair distribution of education. Although meritocracy aims to benefit individuals irrespective of their background, it may lead to unequal outcomes and reinforce social hierarchies if certain groups face systematic exclusion based on uncontrollable factors.

Minimum standards: Minimum standards establish a norm for education accessible to all. For instance, ensuring access to basic education is considered a right for every citizen, and governments may offer free basic education in public schools to fulfill this norm. Measuring minimum standards helps evaluate an individual's likelihood of meeting the required educational level. Equity is achieved when all individuals meet the standard, and this principle is essential in promoting universal primary education, as seen in the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals.

Impartiality: Impartiality ensures equal opportunities for all students, irrespective of gender, wealth, caste, race, ethnicity, or background. Various measures, such as comparing differences between groups using parity indices, co-variation analysis, concentration curves, and group-level cumulative information, assess impartiality. While the concept of equality of opportunity is dominant in normative frameworks for equity in education, “impartiality” is used to separate the moral and political philosophy of equal opportunities from the statistical examination of distribution in education.

Equality of condition: Equality of condition evaluates the distribution of educational variables among individuals without considering their circumstances. Measures such as difference/gap, ratio analysis, dispersion calculations, and concentration cumulative information are used to assess this concept. Impartiality is one approach to measuring inequality in education, considering how educational variables relate to circumstances like wealth, gender, or location. Another approach is “equality of condition,” where the distribution of educational variables across individuals is examined regardless of their circumstances. The Lorenz curve graphically represents this distribution, revealing the degree of inequality in education.

Redistribution: Redistribution involves the fair allocation of resources in education to compensate for existing disadvantages. For instance, governments can distribute educational inputs unequally but in a manner that compensates for disadvantages. Certain regions or groups facing educational disadvantages can receive additional resources or funding to level the playing field. Redistribution indicators help measure the extent to which this unequal distribution of resources compensates for existing disadvantages, ensuring that resources are allocated equitably to promote fairness in educational outcomes.

2.5.2 National Conceptual Framework for Measuring Equity

The Government of Nepal developed a Consolidated Equity Strategy in December 2014 for the School Education Sector to address the need for strengthening equity in education. The strategy aims to reduce the current disparities in access, participation, and learning outcomes for children in basic and secondary public education in Nepal. The strategy presents a two-fold approach to meet these objectives, which includes the development of an Equity in Education Index (Equity Index) and the consolidation and further targeting of current strategies deployed by the government and development partners. An Equity Index Option Paper was developed based on the consensus reached among government and development partners informed by the possibilities presented in the Options Paper and subsequent analysis and testing of available data. The Equity Index is intended to be the core planning and monitoring tool for the full-fledged implementation of the Consolidated Equity Strategy and is planned to be used to target the most disadvantaged districts for specific interventions. The purpose of the Equity Index is to account for children's opportunities for school education as well as the equality of opportunity across children facing different circumstances or contexts. It aimed to ensure comprehensive planning and monitoring while targeting interventions in the most disadvantaged areas. The strategy recognizes equity as both a means and an end, emphasizing its role in empowering individuals and fostering social cohesion through valuing diversity. It provides a framework for ensuring equitable access and participation in education, aiming to offer equal opportunities for all students to reach their full potential. The strategy acknowledges eight dimensions of equity in education that directly impact children's life outcomes, such as gender, socio-economic status, geographical location, health, disabilities, caste and ethnicity, language, and children of vulnerable groups. By promoting social inclusion and equity in education, the strategy focuses on enrolling out-of-school children, improving participation and learning outcomes, and implementing gender equality in girls' education. The ultimate aim is to establish a more equitable and inclusive education system in Nepal.

Table 2.1 Outcome Equity Index

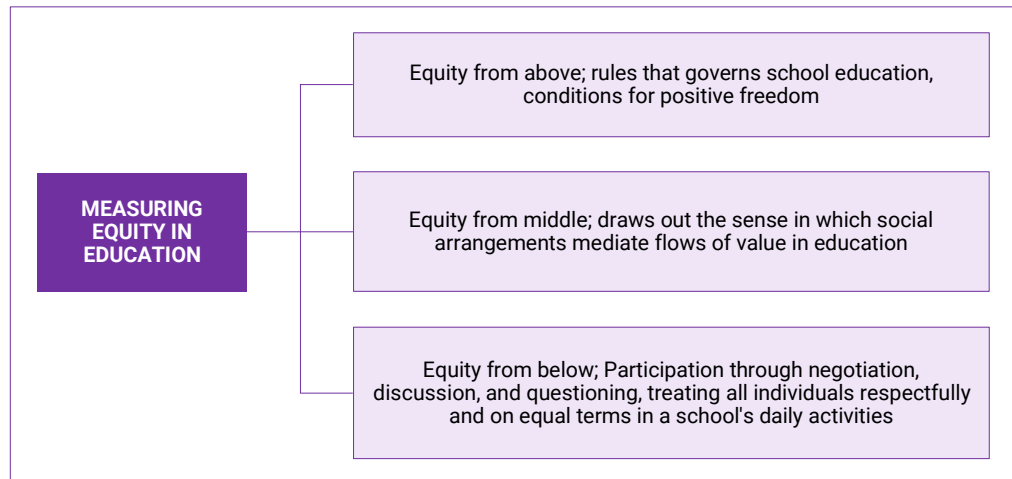
Indicator	Source of Data	Dimensions of Equity	Level of Disaggregation	Levels of Education	Frequency
Out of school rate	EMIS and population census	Gender, additional dimensions (location, caste/ethnicity, disability, wealth, mother's education) if dataset is made available to DoE.	District only	Basic education (1-8)	Every year for gender, once for additional dimensions if they become available
Survival rates	EMIS	Gender, location, caste/ethnic groups using exact figures. Disability using available data on enrolment and estimates for repetition. Disability may be computed exactly once individual student information (or more disaggregated information) becomes available at the central level.	District, VDC school for average, district only for disparities along dimensions of equity	Basic education (1-8), secondary (9-12)	Every year
Learning Outcomes	SLC 8 th grade district exam data	Gender	District, VDC, school for SLC, VDC and school only for 8 th grade exams (no comparability between districts).	10 th grade for SLC 8 th grade for district exam	Every year

Source: UNICEF. (2018). *Equity Index Outline Paper*

2.5.3 Unterhalter: A conceptual framework for measuring equity

Unterhalter (2009) identified three different ways in which equity can be understood in education and distinguished three forms of equity: equity from below (equity as participation among equals), equity from above (equity as regulation), and equity from the middle (equity as associated with resources, finance, and a process of redeeming money or making investments). Equity, from above, refers to fair and reasonable legislation or rules that come into existence due to consultations and negotiations in widely recognized powerful bodies such as parliaments and courts. Equity from the middle is the flow of ideas, time, money, skill, organization, or artifacts that enable the professional development and learning of children. Equity from below entails dialogue and discussion about the expansion of a capability set across myriad points of view and personal heterogeneity. According to Unterhalter (2009), all three forms of equity are important for expanding capabilities in education and assessing equality, considering human diversity. Equity from below requires an architecture of regulations and laws associated with equity from above to be sustained, while equity from the middle provides the necessary resources for an inclusive and efficient education system.

Figure 2.1 Unterhalter framework for measuring equity in education



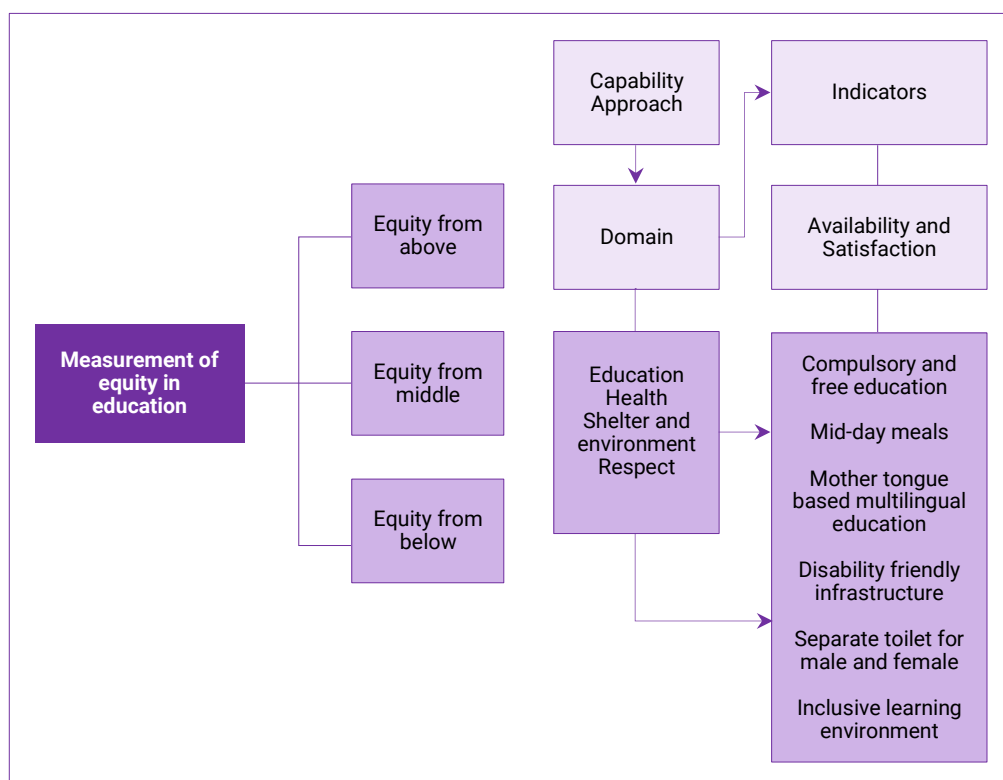
Source: (Unterhalter, E. 2009)

2.6 Theoretical Framework for Measuring Equity in Education

The conceptual framework I will be using for my study is the Unterhalter Conceptual Framework, which measures equity at three levels. Unterhalter draws from Sen's idea of "equality in the space of capabilities" to describe three forms of equity that are essential to expanding capabilities in education and achieving equality. These three forms of equity in education are equity from above, equity from below, and equity from the middle. Equity, from above, refers to the regulations and laws that govern education at the institutional or state level. Equity from the middle is associated with the allocation of resources and the efficiency of education, which involves facilitating investments in learning, teacher development, and other resources necessary for expanding educational capabilities. Equity from below focuses on treating all individuals respectfully and equally in the daily activities of a school, which emphasizes the importance of diversity, recognition, and identity in education.

These three levels of equity represent different aspects related to rules and regulations promoting positive freedom and the flow of resources for efficient education and highlight the importance of participatory processes and reflective negotiation to foster fairness and inclusivity in education. Unterhalter's concepts of equity from above, equity from the middle, and equity from below are closely intertwined, and all three forms of equity are important for achieving equity in education. The capabilities approach is useful in understanding how interpersonal variations can limit an individual's ability to convert resources into valuable functioning. This approach emphasizes individual freedom and goes beyond simply removing economic barriers to education. This framework for analyzing equity in education aligns with the capability approach, specifically equity from below, which takes seriously aspects of personal heterogeneity both in circumstances and in conceptions of a good life. Equity from below seems to align with the emphasis in the capability approach on agency, process, and freedoms and with Sen's interest in deliberative democracy (Sen, A. 2005).

Figure 2.2 Conceptual Framework for measuring equity in education



Equity from above: Equity from above refers to the institutional conditions that enable positive freedoms in education. It establishes an overarching framework for a common understanding of fairness in education. It involves the creation of regulations, laws, and policies that ensure equal opportunities and access to education for all individuals. This form of equity focuses on establishing a framework that supports fairness and equality within the educational system. It involves creating an architecture of regulations and laws that enable equity from below, supporting inclusive practices, and addressing systemic barriers. It is about ensuring laws about fair access and participation that could expand a capability set are adhered to across profound differences of gender, class, and caste. Equity, from above, is about establishing rules that have been decided to be fair and reasonable by some widely recognized body of opinion.

Equity from middle: Equity from the Middle focuses on the flows of money, skills, and ideas that impact the delivery and enjoyment of education for all individuals. This form of equity recognizes the importance of financial and material support in delivering education effectively. Equity from the middle also refers to a balance between equity from above and equity from below. This means that policies and practices are in place to ensure that individuals not only have access to resources and opportunities but also have the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns.

Equity from below: Equity from below involves participatory processes of reflection and review where dialogue and discussion among stakeholders contribute to expanding the capability set of education. It highlights the need for inclusive practices

that address the diverse needs and backgrounds of students. Equity from below refers to a space for reasonable and reflective negotiation between individuals or groups. This means that individuals have the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns and that decisions are made through a collaborative process. This form of equity is associated with a belief in people's access to powerful knowledge and the importance of respecting each other in everyday relationships, whatever our differences. It is a way of thinking about equity that is associated with personal heterogeneity, both in circumstances and in conceptions of a good life.

2.6.1 Domains and Indicators

The research focuses on four specific capabilities within the capabilities approach framework. These capabilities are chosen as key domains to understand and analyze equity in education.

Education: The Capability The approach considers education as a fundamental capability that extends beyond basic literacy and numeracy. It has been demonstrated through research that the act of investing in education not only enhances individual capabilities but also engenders favorable outcomes for societies, such as amplified economic productivity, diminished inequality, and bolstered social cohesion (Unterhalter, 2005; Robeyns, 2006). Under this domain of education, indicators such as free education and mother tongue-based multilingual education availability and satisfaction among a diverse group of students are assessed to provide valuable insights into the inclusiveness and equity of education systems.

Health: The Capability The approach considers health as a significant capability that encompasses physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Good health is essential for individuals to lead fulfilling lives, engage in various activities, and pursue their goals and aspirations. Amartya Sen argued that health is a foundational capability, affecting people's ability to function and participate in society. Within this domain, indicators such as availability and satisfaction regarding mid-day meals are evaluated, as these programs can have a significant impact on students' nutrition, health, and overall educational experience.

Shelter and environment: Shelter and environment are critical capabilities within the Capability Approach, contributing to people's overall well-being and quality of life. Research studies examining the intersection of shelter, environment, and the Capability Approach have emphasized the significance of providing secure housing and access to basic amenities to enhance human capabilities (Krahn & Lam, 2017; Biggeri et al., 2019). In this domain, we assess the availability and satisfaction of infrastructure designed to accommodate people with disabilities, as well as the availability and satisfaction of separate restroom facilities for males and females.

Respect: Respect is a central capability within the Capability Approach, referring to the recognition of individuals' inherent dignity, agency, and equal worth. It involves being treated with dignity, fairness, and without discrimination. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum emphasized that respect is not just an outcome of the capability approach but also a key value that informs the process of enhancing capabilities. In this domain,

the focus is on evaluating whether individuals from varied backgrounds experience a sense of respect, acknowledgment, and inclusion within the school setting. The indicators, such as opinions valued and respected by teachers, teachers greeting back to students, respect by friends, and witnessing and experiencing bullying and discrimination within the school environment, are assessed by students belonging to diverse ethnic groups, linguistic backgrounds, genders, religious affiliations, and income levels.

2.6.2 Factors

Factors such as age, ethnic composition, gender, religion, grade, and socio-economic status (parent's income level) were analyzed with different indicators to get a comprehensive understanding of the implementation and effectiveness of equity plans and programs. The ultimate goal is to gather a holistic understanding of the availability and effectiveness of free education, mother tongue-based multilingual education, provision of mid-day meals, infrastructure accommodating people with disabilities, and separate toilet facilities for males and females while assessing that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have access to a satisfying education experience and an equitable inclusive learning environment.

Research Methodology

This chapter describes the detailed research design, which includes the overall methodology as well as the data collection procedures used in the study. The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, assimilating both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools for a comprehensive understanding of the research issue. The chapter explains the selection of study sites and the rationale behind them to ensure generalizability and contextualization of the findings. Furthermore, the chapter also discusses the tools and techniques used for data collection, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations to maintain the integrity and validity of the research.

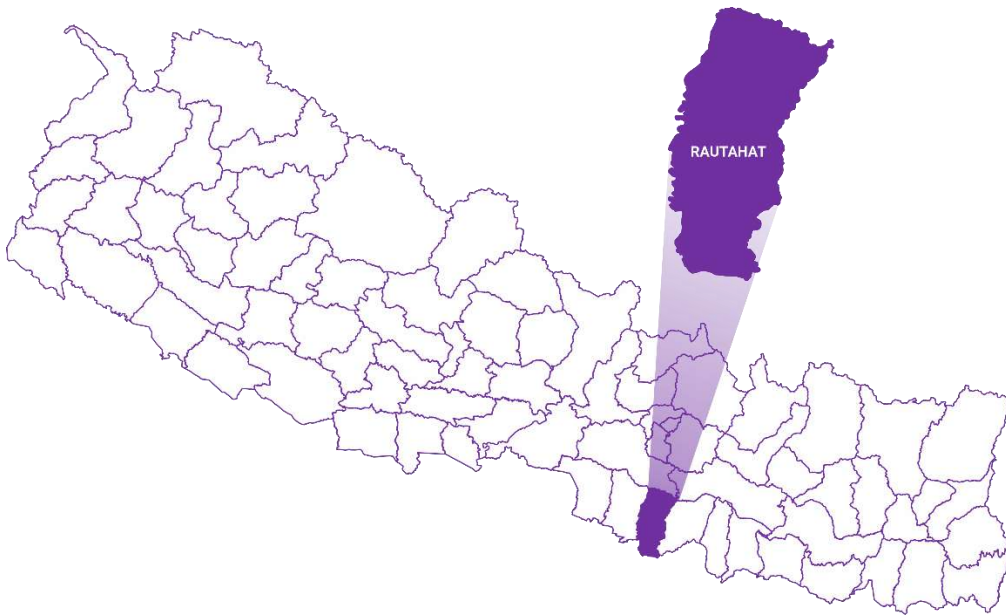
3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. Mixed-method research involves the integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods within a single study. By combining subjective insights and objective data, this approach enables researchers to attain a more holistic comprehension of the research topic and facilitates the triangulation of findings to enhance validity and reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The questionnaires that encompassed both qualitative unstructured (open-ended) and quantitative (close-ended) questions were prepared for data collection. Additionally, guidelines for conducting interviews and observations were developed and employed as qualitative tools during the field visit.

3.2 Description of the field site

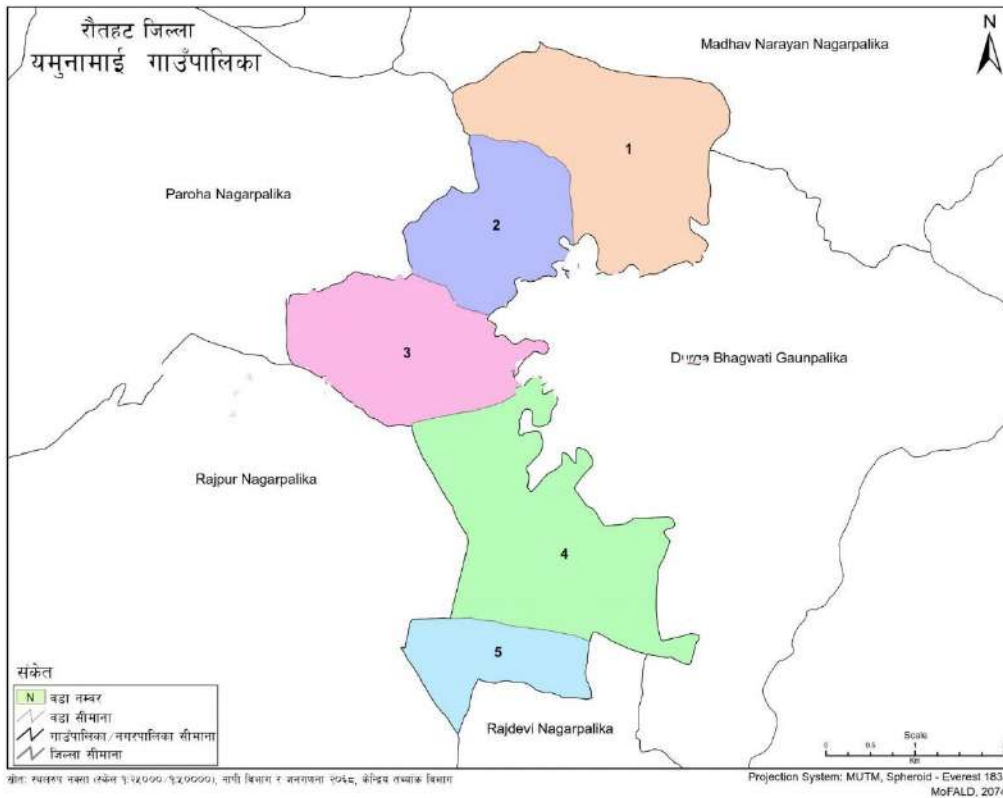
The study was conducted in Yamuna Mai Rural Municipality (YRM) and Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality (DRM) in the Rautahat district of Madhesh province, Nepal. Rautahat district is located in the southern part of Nepal and is bordered by Sarlahi district to the east, Bara district to the west, Chitwan district to the north, and the Indian state of Bihar to the south. The district spans approximately 1,126 square kilometers and is known for having the highest percentage of Muslims in Nepal. According to the 2021 census, Rautahat district has a total population of 813,573, consisting of 408,403 males and 405,170 females. There are a total of 370 schools in Rautahat district. The study focused on 12 public schools within the district that cater to the educational needs of the residents. The selection of Rautahat as the study site was based on its relatively lower literacy rate of 57.5% as per the 2021 census.

Figure 3.1 Rautahat District in Map of Nepal



Source: Field Survey, 2023

Figure 3.2 Yamunamai Rural Municipality

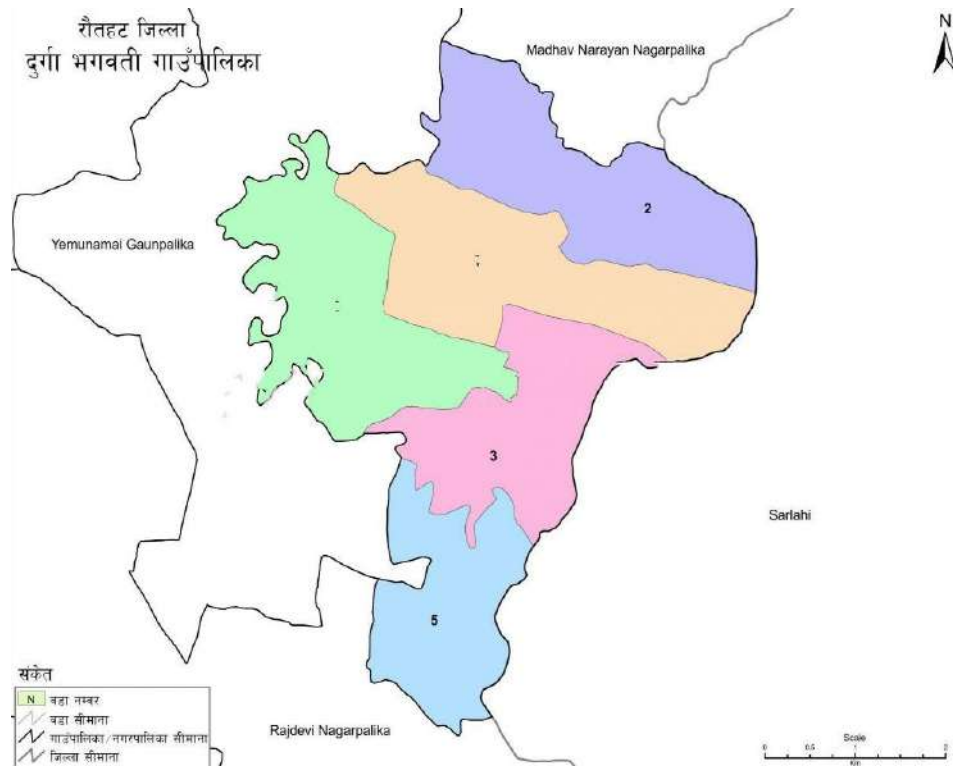


Source: MoFALD, 2074

In 2016, Yamunamai Rural Municipality was established, comprising five wards. This rural municipality covers an area of 16.70 square kilometers and has a total population of 23,884 residents. According to the Nepal government records for 2017, there were

a total of 19 schools operating within the boundaries of Yamunamai Rural Municipality, catering to the educational needs of the local community.

Figure 3.3 Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality



Source: MoFALD, 2074

In 2016, Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality was established, encompassing the following five wards: Gangapipara, Bhalohiya, Matsari, Pachrukhi, and Badharwa. The rural municipality occupies an area of 19.80 square kilometers and has a total population of 22,599 residents. Within the boundaries of Durgabhagwati Rural Municipality, there are two secondary schools, twelve primary schools, and one Madarasha, providing educational opportunities for the local community.

3.3 Duration of study

The research was carried out for a specific duration of 5 months, ranging from March to July. The study involved two separate field visits to the research site. The initial field visit occurred from 8th May to 22nd May, while the second visit took place from 16th June to 28th June. These field visits played a crucial role in collecting data and conducting observations in the study area.

3.4 Sample Size and Technique

Sampling is a research technique that involves choosing a smaller group of individuals or items from a larger population to serve as representatives for data collection and analysis (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). A comprehensive survey was conducted, in which 600 participants participated. The survey consisted of equal representation from two rural municipalities: Durga Bhagwati and Yamunamai. Within the Durga Bhagwati rural municipality, there were 300 respondents, out of whom 150 were female and 150 were male students belonging to the third to eighth grades.

Similarly, in the Yamunamai rural municipality, another three hundred participants were surveyed, with 150 females and 150 males taking part in the survey. This study employs a sampling method that combines stratified sampling and random sampling. Stratified sampling first divides the class of students based on gender into two strata, one for boys and one for girls. This division ensures that each stratum represents a specific gender group within the class. Subsequently, respondents from each stratum are selected randomly using the random sampling method. This approach guarantees that every individual within the stratum has an equal chance of being included in the sample. This strategy was used to ensure that the sample included an equal number of boys and girls from both Durga Bhagwati and Yamunamai rural municipalities. Such an approach improves the representation of both genders in the study, allowing for a more robust and accurate analysis of the research findings. The following tabular representation depicts the various demographic attributes of the participants who were engaged in the study.

3.4.1 Gender of the Respondents

The table presents valuable insights into the demographics of the individuals who participated in the study. The participants are divided equally between the two genders, with both males and females comprising 50% of the overall sample.

Table 3.1 Gender of the respondents

Gender	Percentage (%)
Female	50%
Male	50%
Total	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

3.4.2 Grade of the Respondents

The table outlines the distribution of participants among various grades. Each grade from 3 to 5 has an equal percentage of 19.80%, and grades 6, 7, and 8 each have a slightly lower percentage of 13.50%. The cumulative percentages add up to 100%, thereby encompassing the entirety of the grade distribution among the respondents.

Table 3.2 Grade of the respondents

Grade	Percentage (%)
3	19.80%
4	19.80%
5	19.80%
6	13.50%
7	13.50%
8	13.50%
Total	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

3.4.3 Ethnicity of the Respondents

This table presents the ethnic composition of the respondents in the study. The table lists various ethnic groups, such as Brahmin, Chettri, Yadav, Dalit, Mahato, Muslim, and others. The highest representation is observed in the “Others” category at 36.33%, followed closely by the “Dalit” ethnicity with 22.00% representation. Ethnicities such as “Yadav” and “Muslim” exhibit moderate percentages of 15.50% and 10.83%, respectively. In contrast, ethnicities like “Brahmin” and “Chettri” have relatively lower percentages of 6.33% and 1.33%, respectively.

Table 3.3 Ethnicity of the respondents

Ethnicity	Percentage (%)
Brahmin	6.33%
Chettri	1.33%
Yadav	15.50%
Dalit	22.00%
Mahato	7.67%
Muslim	10.83%
Others	36.33%
Total	100.00%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

3.4.4 Age of the Respondents

The table offers insights into the distribution of respondents based on their ages. The age group 9–11 has the highest representation, accounting for 45.0% of the respondents, followed by the age group 12–14, which constitutes 35.33% of the respondents. The age group 6–8 has a representation of 14.83%, while the age group 15–17 has the lowest representation at 4.83%.

Table 3.4 Age of the Respondents

Age	Percentage (%)
6-8	14.83%
9-11	45.00%
12-14	35.33%
15-17	4.83%
Total	100.00%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

3.4.5 Religion of the Respondents

The table outlines the religious composition of the respondents. Hinduism is the predominant religion among the participants, with a substantial 88.33% representation. Islam follows with 11.17%, while the “Others” category represents a smaller portion at 0.5%.

Table 3.5 Religion of the Respondents

Religion	Percentage (%)
Hindu	88.33%
Islam	11.17%
Others	0.5%
Total	100.00%

Source Field survey, 2023

3.5 Data collection method

A comprehensive approach was taken for data collection, involving both qualitative and quantitative tools to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Primary data was collected using survey questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and observations, while secondary data was gathered from related research articles, books, reports, and municipal records. During the research, a variety of tools were employed to collect data, which are described below:

- **Survey Questionnaire:** The survey questionnaire consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions, allowing for a combination of quantitative and

qualitative data collection. Open-ended questions provided a lot of space to grab qualitative data. The questionnaire was divided into different sections according to themes. The first section contained demographic questions about their age and gender, ethnicity, religion, linguistic background, etc., whereas other components had questionnaires based on themes like health, respect, shelter and environment, and education.

- **Focus group discussion:** Prior to developing the questionnaire, a two-week field visit was conducted at the research site to facilitate focus group discussions (FGDs). During the field visit, we facilitated 16 focused group discussions with students from grades 3 to 8, which included a total of 200 participants. Among them, there were 102 girls and 98 boys who took part in the discussions. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to delve into the students' interpretations and comprehension of 19 lists of capabilities and how these capabilities contribute to their overall functioning. After analyzing the data gathered from the focus group discussions, particular capabilities that were deemed significant and relevant to our study context were recognized. Consequently, the domain for analysis was generated based on the data collected from the focus group discussions.
- **Observation:** Observation is the systematic data collection approach. Observation is a research technique that entails methodically and impartially observing and documenting behaviors, events, or phenomena in either a natural or controlled environment (McLeod, 2018). Close observation was done during this research, which has also served as the foundation for supporting the case studies conducted during the field visit period. Additionally, I also paid keen attention to the surrounding communities of each school to understand the broader social context in which the school functions and its potential impact on students' educational experiences.
- **Interview:** During the research, in-depth interviews were conducted with a select group of respondents. These interviews played a crucial role in gathering detailed and comprehensive information. The insights and data collected from these interviews formed the foundation for developing a few case studies. These case studies provided in-depth and contextualized accounts of specific situations and experiences related to the research topic. By using the rich qualitative data obtained from the interviews, the case studies offered a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances surrounding the research subject.
- **Case study:** Through individual interviews and observation with the respondents, three cases were identified. These cases illustrate how specific policies and programs have successfully addressed the needs of individuals, resulting in positive impacts on their lives. Some cases highlight instances where policies have been effectively implemented to benefit marginalized communities, while other cases demonstrate policy gaps that need to be addressed to create a more equitable environment within schools.

3.6 Data analysis tools

The data analysis in this study involved using several tools, such as Microsoft Excel, SPSS, and STATA software. The survey responses were entered into the KOBO toolbox and transferred to Excel, STATA, and SPSS to enhance their clarity and interpretation, and essential graphs and tables were created using that software.

3.7 Consent and ethical consideration

During the research process, each respondent was provided with a thorough explanation of the study's objectives and the importance of their participation, and their informed consent was obtained before proceeding with the survey questionnaire or interview. The questionnaire itself was specifically tailored for academic purposes, thereby ensuring its appropriateness and relevance to the research objectives. Furthermore, proper consent was obtained from individuals whose case studies were utilized in the study, ensuring that their participation was voluntary and informed. This commitment to ethical research practices reinforces the credibility and integrity of the study and protects the rights and privacy of the participants.

Results and Discussion

4.1 Measurement of equity from above

In this section, we outline the existing policies, programs, and strategies aimed at ensuring equitable and inclusive educational opportunities for all.

Figure 4.1 Measurement of equity from above



4.1.1 Nepal School Education Sector Plan 2023-2032

Nepal has implemented the Nepal School Education Sector Plan, which has the primary objective of granting equitable access and participation in a comprehensive school education cycle to every child, irrespective of their social and economic background or disabilities. This means that the plan aims to ensure that every child has the opportunity to receive an equitable and quality education, from primary to secondary school, without any discrimination or barriers. The core principle integrated into the policy is equity, which, as defined in this plan, entails recognizing the factors that contribute to disparities among various groups of children, such as caste or ethnicity, location, socio-economic status, mother tongue, (dis)ability, and gender. The aim of equity is to implement affirmative action to prioritize these groups and offer tailored support to address these disparities and achieve equity in educational outcomes.

The three objectives of the Nepal School Education Sector Plan under equity and inclusion are as follows:

- The first objective is to increase the participation of targeted groups in education and improve their learning outcomes. These targeted groups include Dalits, Janajatis, and endangered communities, those living in geographically remote areas, vulnerable, physically challenged, economically disadvantaged, conflict-affected, minorities, and socially and economically deprived children. The plan aims to provide easy access to schooling for these groups.
- The second objective is to deliver quality educational services by strengthening the school education system. This will be achieved by integrating the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The plan recognizes the importance of diversity in

the classroom and aims to create an inclusive environment that caters to the needs of all students.

- The third objective is to create an environment that is conducive to the regular attendance, participation, and learning of children. This will be achieved by ensuring that the school environment is free of any forms of discrimination, abuse, or bullying. The plan recognizes that a safe and supportive learning environment is essential for students to thrive and achieve their full potential.

The strategies for achieving equity and inclusive education in the Nepal School Education Sector

- The first strategy is to continue implementing the Consolidated Equity Strategy, which includes actions based on recommendations from a 2020 independent evaluation.
- The second strategy is to make schools child-friendly, disabled-friendly, gender-friendly, environment-friendly, and disaster-resilient by meeting the physical and educational conditions required for learning.
- The third strategy is to publicly declare municipalities that ensure the enrollment and participation of all children in the basic education age group as long as they fulfill the required criteria for compulsory and free education.
- The fourth strategy is to expand need-based alternative education programs and extend them to Grade 12, while also identifying the types and forms of disabilities and arranging for the schooling of children with disabilities through appropriate educational approaches.
- The fifth strategy is to provide scholarships to economically disadvantaged, deprived, vulnerable, and disabled children, with a review of scholarship amounts given to various groups and a revision of the scholarship administration system.
- The sixth strategy is to give priority to providing opportunities for learning through the use of mother tongues and/or local languages in a multilingual context at the basic level.

4.1.2 Inclusive education

- The first strategy for inclusive education is to make curricula and curricular materials inclusive and gender, disability, socially, and culturally sensitive while also incorporating topics related to local languages, cultures, geography, history, civic knowledge and skills, comprehensive sexual education, and reproductive health.
- The second strategy is to update the Integrated Educational Management Information System (IEMIS) by incorporating necessary equity indicators, updating the Consolidated Equity Strategy, and using equity indicators in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of educational plans.
- The third strategy is to create a child-friendly environment by making the learning activities participatory, maintaining diversity with respect to students' needs, and making schools free of any forms of discrimination, abuse, or bullying.

4.1.3 Basic education

This research focuses on basic education, so let's examine and map the various objectives, programs, and strategies to ensure equitable and inclusive education at this

level under the Nepal School Education Sector Plan 2023-2032. Basic education is essential for children's overall growth, livelihood, and social adaptation, preparing them for further education and the transition to secondary schooling. It encompasses the early years, when children acquire fundamental learning skills like numeracy, literacy, and soft skills, which form the basis for advanced learning. Nepal's Constitution guarantees that every child has the right to compulsory and free basic education. The responsibility of providing basic education lies with the state, as per the 2018 Compulsory and Free Education Act. The Act also states that the three tiers of government, along with parents and guardians, are responsible for ensuring that children receive a basic education. Basic education, as defined by the 8th Amendment to the Education Act, includes early childhood education and development (ECED) up to grade eight.

The objective of the plan is to develop a capable, well-governed, accountable, and competitive public school education system that ensures citizens' rights to acquire relevant and quality education comparable to regional and international standards. The objectives are as follows:

- The first objective is to effectively implement free and compulsory basic education to ensure equitable access to and participation by all age-appropriate children. This means that all children, regardless of their socio-economic status or disabilities, should have access to basic education and be able to participate in it.
- The second objective is to enable all children to complete the full cycle of basic education with minimum learning outcomes. This means that all children should be able to complete their basic education and achieve minimum learning outcomes, which will prepare them for higher education or the workforce.
- The third objective is to ensure foundational literacy and numeracy in the early grades. This means that children should be able to read, write, and do basic math by the time they complete their early grades.
- The fourth objective is to improve the learning outcomes of all children studying at the basic level. This means that the quality of education should be improved so that all children can achieve better learning outcomes.
- The fifth objective is to improve the governance and management system of school education and make schooling inclusive, resilient, and accountable. This means that the governance and management of the education system should be improved to ensure that it is inclusive, resilient, and accountable. This will help to ensure that all children have access to quality education and that the education system can adapt to changing circumstances, such as natural disasters or pandemics.

Similarly, the strategies to improve the quality and equity of education in Nepal include:

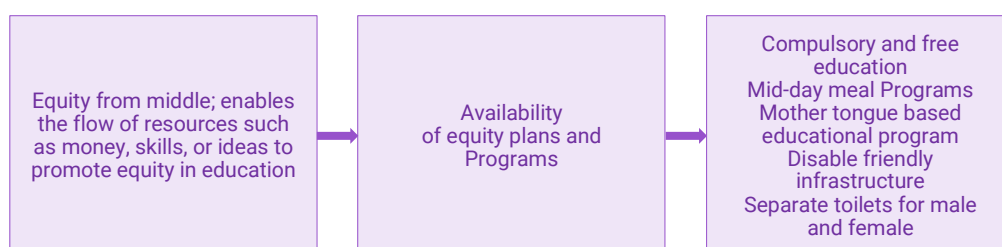
- Conducting school mapping to ensure that schools are distributed fairly and rationally, providing equal opportunities for all children to access education.
- Encouraging local levels to create and implement plans to bring all out-of-school children into basic education.
- Improving scholarship programs to ensure that economically disadvantaged, vulnerable, marginalized, and disabled children are able to enroll, participate, and remain in school
- Providing midday meals to basic-level students in collaboration with local health and other governmental and non-governmental organizations

- Providing safe water, sanitation, hygiene, basic health, and nutrition services to improve the health and nutrition status of all basic-level students
- Promoting the safe school concept to ensure that all schools meet minimum standards for a safe learning environment for children
- Improving foundational proficiency in literacy and numeracy for grades 1-3 through an integrated approach in the curriculum
- Creating child-friendly, inclusive, safe, and discrimination-free schools by improving their physical and educational environments
- Using inclusive learning materials, methods, and processes that respect and encompass socio-cultural diversity in teaching
- Improving the physical and educational environments of all schools to make them student-friendly and enable an environment for learning
- Promoting life skill development and engaging students in the operation and maintenance of school infrastructure through child clubs
- Periodically assessing the performance of schools and their students' learning outcomes to promote a systematic process of learning facilitation and accountability
- Providing sufficient numbers of qualified, well-motivated, and competent teachers in accordance with approved standards

4.2 Measurement of equity from the middle

This section focuses on evaluating the availability and implementation of equity programs in school settings, with a key emphasis on their capacity to cater to the diverse needs of individuals of various ethnicities, religions, and economic genders. The assessment aims to determine whether the distribution of resources is equitable and whether the identified programs, such as free education, mid-day meals, mother tongue-based education, and strategies like disability-friendly infrastructure and separate toilets for male and female students, contribute to promoting and sustaining equity within the educational system.

Figure 4.2 Measurement of Equity from middle



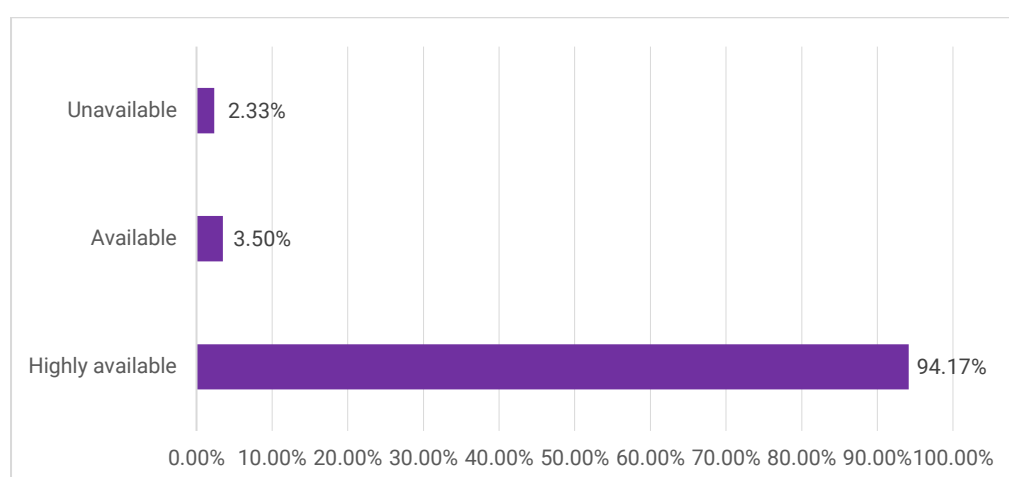
4.2.1 Compulsory and free education

According to the Constitution of Nepal (2015), public education in public schools is free and compulsory. This section aims to assess the overall availability of free education, considering factors such as gender, ethnicity, and religion. By evaluating the availability of free education, we can analyze the implementation of the policy that strives to ensure inclusive and equitable access to quality education in Nepal.

4.2.1.1 Availability of compulsory and free education

The bar graph below illustrates the perceptions of respondents regarding the availability of compulsory and free education. Among the respondents, 94.17% considered it highly available, 3.50% perceived it as available, and a smaller percentage of 2.33% reported it as unavailable. Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents viewed compulsory and free education as widely accessible. However, it is important to note that a portion of respondents (2.33%) reported its unavailability. This underscores the need to address any barriers or challenges that hinder access to ensure equitable opportunities for all. Overall, the data suggest a generally positive perception of the availability of compulsory and free education among the respondents and emphasize the importance of ensuring widespread access to education and eliminating any barriers that may prevent individuals from benefiting from compulsory and free education.

Figure 4.3 Availability of Compulsory and free education



Source: Field Survey, 2023

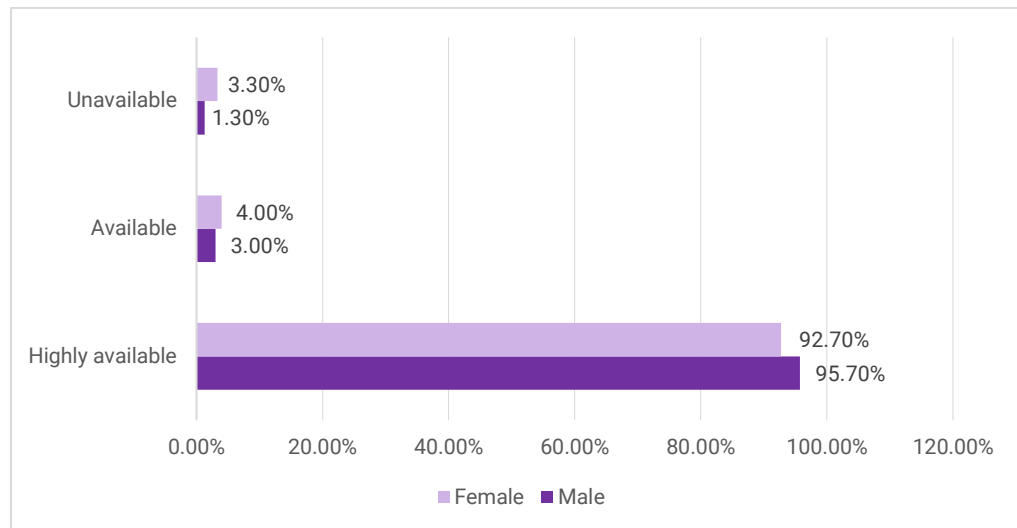
4.2.1.2 Availability of Compulsory and Free Education by Gender

The diagram provided indicates the availability of compulsory and free education based on gender. The analysis reveals that a majority of both female and male respondents perceive compulsory and free education to be highly available, with percentages of 92.7% and 95.7%, respectively. The data suggests that the policy of compulsory and free education has been effective in ensuring availability for the majority of respondents. However, a small portion of respondents, both female and male, reported that compulsory and free education was either available (3.0% for males or 4.0% for females) or unavailable (1.3% for males and 3.3% for females). This implies that a few respondents perceive obstacles or difficulties in accessing free education, although this accounts for a relatively small portion of the total respondents.

The data indicates that there is no significant disparity between the responses of male and female participants. The percentages for the availability of compulsory and free education for both genders are quite similar, indicating that both male and female students have equal access to educational opportunities. Overall, the data reflects the positive perception of compulsory and free education availability among respondents. However, it also highlights the importance of addressing any barriers or challenges that

may impede access to education for the minority of respondents who reported it as unavailable. To promote equity, educational authorities can continue their efforts to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that caters to the diverse needs of all students, regardless of their gender.

Figure 4.4 Availability of Compulsory and Free Education by Gender

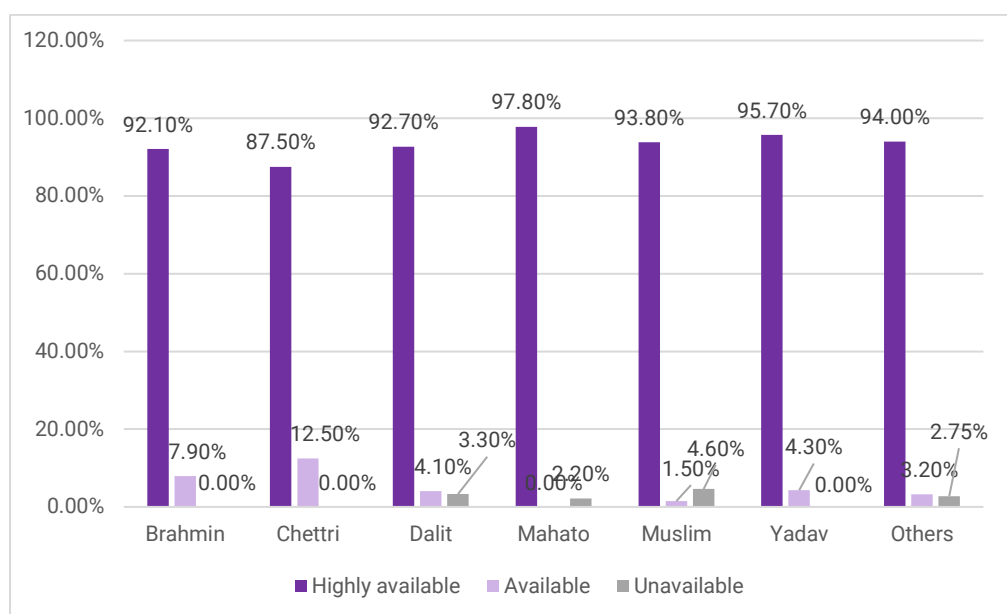


Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.2.1.3 Availability of compulsory and free education by ethnicity

The figure reveals the availability of compulsory and free education among different ethnic groups in Nepal. The table shows that the majority of ethnic groups have a high percentage of schools with highly available compulsory and free education. Brahmins (92.1%), Dalits (92.7%), Mahatos (97.8%), Muslims (93.8%), Yadavs (95.7%), and others (94.0%) all have relatively high access to free education. This high availability indicates that a significant proportion of students from these ethnic groups have access to educational opportunities, which is a positive indicator of equitable access to education. The data indicate that a small proportion of schools have reported the unavailability of compulsory and free education for Dalit (3.3%), Muslim (4.6%), and other (2.75%) ethnic groups. This is a concerning aspect, as it suggests that some students from these ethnic backgrounds might face challenges in accessing education. Overall, the data highlights variations in the availability of compulsory and free education among different ethnic groups. While the majority perceive it as highly available, there are varying proportions reporting limited availability or unavailability within their respective ethnic groups. This data also highlights the need to address any disparities or barriers that may exist within specific ethnic groups to ensure equitable access to education for all individuals, regardless of their ethnicity.

Figure 4.5 Availability of Compulsory and Free education by ethnicity



Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.2.1.4 Availability of compulsory and free education based on religion

The data presented in the table provides an overview of the availability of compulsory and free education based on religion. Among Hindu respondents, 94.3% perceive compulsory and free education as highly available, while 3.6% report that it is available and 2.1% indicate unavailability. Similarly, among Islamic respondents, 92.5% perceive it as highly available, 3.0% report it, and 4.5% indicate unavailability. In the “Others” category, which represents respondents from different religious backgrounds, 100% perceive compulsory and free education as highly available.

In general, the data suggests a positive perception of the availability of compulsory and free education among respondents from different religious backgrounds. The majority of Hindu and Muslim respondents perceive it as highly available. However, it is important to note that a small percentage within each religious group reports limited availability or unavailability. Although the government has made efforts to mandate free education, there appears to be an issue at the school level. It is crucial to further investigate the reasons behind the reported unavailability of each religious group. An effort should be made to identify the reasons behind this disparity and implement targeted interventions to ensure equitable opportunities for education for all individuals, regardless of their religious affiliations.

Table 4.1 Availability of compulsory and free education based on religion

Religion	Compulsory and free education (Availability)			Total
	Highly available	Available	Unavailable	
Hindu	94.3%	3.6%	2.1%	100.0%
Islam	92.5%	3.0%	4.5%	100.0%
Others	100.0%	0.00%	0.00%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.2.2 Mid-day meal

According to Nepal's education plan, one of the key strategies to improve the physical and educational environments of schools is to arrange midday meals in school to support the nutritional status and health of basic-level children. These programs aim to provide nutritious meals to students, particularly in marginalized and disadvantaged communities, to improve their overall well-being and enhance their ability to learn. This section aims to assess the overall availability of midday meals, considering factors such as gender, ethnicity, and religion. By evaluating the availability of midday meals, we can analyze the implementation of the policy that strives to ensure inclusive and equitable access to quality education in Nepal. The data was originally collected from 600 respondents, but for the mid-day meal analysis, we narrowed down the total number of respondents to 359. This reduction was due to our specific focus on students enrolled in Grades 3 to 5, as the mid-day meal scheme is an essential policy aimed at enhancing the nutritional intake and educational experience of school-going children and specifically targets students from ECD to Grade 5.

4.2.2.1 Availability of a mid-day meal

The table presents an analysis of the availability of the mid-day meal scheme, categorized into three levels: "highly available," "available," and unavailable." Among the respondents, 78.83% perceived mid-day meals to be highly available, while 13.37% considered them available, and a smaller percentage of respondents, 7.80%, reported that mid-day meals were unavailable. Based on this analysis, it can be inferred that the majority of respondents perceived midday meals to be highly available.

However, it is worth noting that a portion of the respondents reported that midday meals were unavailable. This indicates that there might be some challenges or gaps in providing these meals to a portion of the participants or within specific contexts. This highlights the need for further evaluation and potential improvement in certain regions to ensure that all eligible beneficiaries have equitable access to the program. Overall, the analysis of the table suggests that while the mid-day meal scheme is generally successful, there is still room for improvement to ensure that it is accessible and equitable to everyone.

Table 4.2 Availability of mid-day meal

Mid-day meal (Availability)	Percentage (%)
Highly available	78.83%
Available	13.37%
Unavailable	7.80%
Total	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.2.2.2 Availability of Midday meals among Different Genders

The table presents the availability of mid-day meals based on gender, categorized into "highly available," "available," and unavailable. Among female respondents, a significant majority (82.32%) perceive mid-day meals as "highly available. Additionally, 9.39% of females consider the meals to be "available," while 8.29% view them as unavailable." For male respondents, approximately 75.28% perceive the scheme as "highly available", 17.42% view the mid-day meal scheme as available," and 7.30% report the mid-day meal scheme as unavailable. The percentage unavailability of mid-day meals is relatively similar for both genders, which suggests that a similar

proportion of students from both genders face the challenge of schools where meals are not provided.

Overall, the analysis reveals that both male and female respondents perceive mid-day meals as mostly “highly available,” with some variation in the proportions. However, some participants consider the scheme to be “available” or “unavailable,” indicating areas for improvement to ensure equitable access for all students, regardless of gender. There are no specific gender differences regarding the accessibility of midday meals. The data suggest that schools and policymakers should address the concerns of individuals to improve the reach and impact of mid-day meal programs. By identifying the factors that hinder accessibility and effectiveness, targeted efforts can be made to benefit a broader spectrum of school-going children, regardless of their gender.

Table 4.3 Availability of Mid-day Meals among Different Gender

Gender	Mid-day meals (Availability)			Total
	Highly available	Available	Unavailable	
Female	82.32%	9.39%	8.29%	100.0%
Male	75.28%	17.42%	7.30%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.2.2.3 Availability of Midday Meals among Different Religions

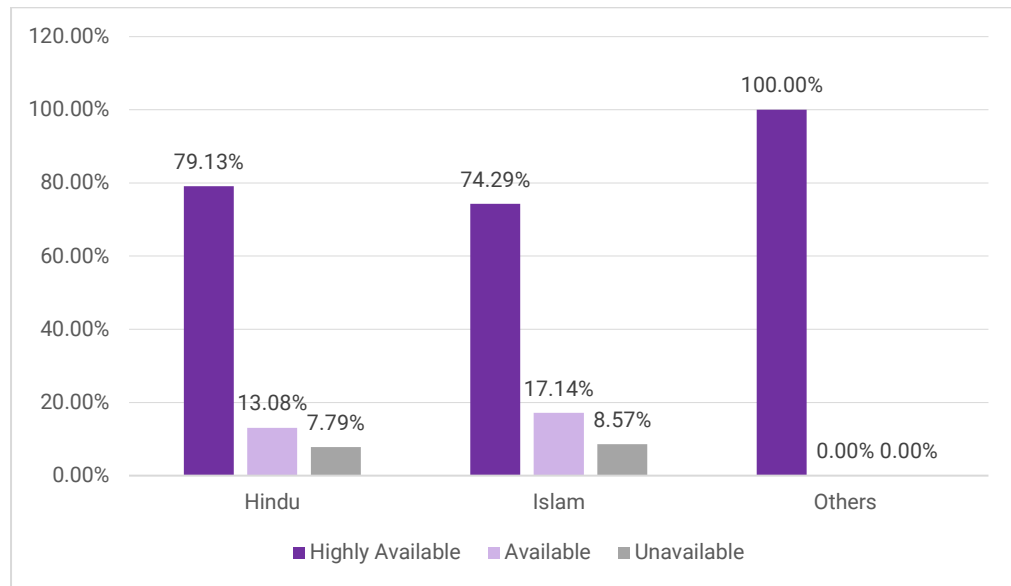
The figure shows the availability of mid-day meals based on religious affiliation, categorized into “highly available,” “available,” and unavailable. Among Hindu students, the data indicates that a significant majority, 79.13%, have mid-day meals highly available at their schools; 13.08% of students reported mid-day meals as available, and a relatively small proportion, 7.79%, stated that mid-day meals are unavailable. Moving on to Islamic students, the data shows that 74.29% of them have mid-day meals highly available, 17.14% reported mid-day meals as available, and 8.57% reported mid-day meals as unavailable. The data for the “Others” category, representing students from various other religious backgrounds, shows that 100% of students in this category have mid-day meals readily available.

In summary, the data indicates that the majority of students from Hindu, Islamic, and other religious categories have access to mid-day meals that are either highly available or available. The percentages of students reporting mid-day meals as unavailable are relatively low for all religious groups, but the existence of even a small percentage of students reporting unavailability raises concerns about the effectiveness and functioning of the mid-day meal program. There might be underlying issues that hinder the implementation of the scheme in certain schools or regions, leading to some students being left without access to meals. From an equity perspective, it is encouraging to see that the majority of schools across all religious groups offer mid-day meals, with no schools in the “Others” category reporting unavailability.

However, there are slight differences in the highly available category, with Hindu students having a slightly higher percentage of schools with meals compared to Muslims. This could indicate a slight disparity in access to nutritious meals among these two religious groups in the region. To ensure equity, policymakers and school authorities should focus on addressing the disparities, if any, and strive to provide equitable opportunities for students of all religious backgrounds to access mid-day

meals. This situation emphasizes the importance of consistently providing midday meals to all students, regardless of their religious background.

Figure 4.6 Availability of Mid-day Meals among Different Religions



Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.2.2.4 Availability of Midday Meals by Ethnicity in Schools

The table presents the availability of the mid-day meal programs across different ethnicities, categorizing it into three levels: “available,” “highly available,” and unavailable. Among the ethnicities, Chettri stands out, with 100.00% of respondents perceiving the mid-day meal scheme as “highly available, indicating the Chettri ethnicity considers the scheme to be widely accessible and readily available. The Dalit ethnic group also has a relatively high percentage (82.02%) of schools with highly available mid-day meals, showing a positive effort to provide access to nutritious food for students from marginalized backgrounds. Brahmin, Muslim, and other ethnicities also reported a significant proportion of respondents perceiving the scheme as “highly available,” with percentages ranging from 57.69% to 80.88%.

Among Mahato, Brahmin, Muslim, and other ethnicities, a substantial percentage of respondents, ranging from 13.10% to 19.23%, perceived the scheme as available. For the “Available” category, the highest percentage is reported by Yadav ethnicity at 19.23%. This suggests that a notable portion of respondents from this ethnicity find the scheme to be available, although it may not be as widespread as being highly available. In the “unavailable” category, the Mahato ethnicity reported the highest percentage at 23.08%, indicating that a significant proportion of respondents within this ethnicity consider the scheme unavailable. The analysis highlights the variations in perceptions regarding the availability of mid-day meal programs among different ethnicities. While some ethnic groups express overwhelmingly positive views of accessibility, others express concerns about midday meal availability. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for policymakers to identify regions or groups that may require targeted improvements to ensure equitable access to the program. Overall, the table's analysis points towards the need for further evaluation and focused efforts to

bridge any gaps in accessibility. Policymakers can use this information to design strategies that address specific concerns and enhance the program's reach, making it more accessible, equitable, and effective for all eligible beneficiaries, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds.

Table 4.4 Availability of Mid-day Meals by Ethnicity in Schools

Ethnicity	Mid-day meal (Availability)			Total
	Highly Available	Available	Unavailable	
Brahmin	77.78%	16.67%	5.56%	100.0%
Chettri	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.0%
Dalit	82.02%	12.36%	5.62%	100.0%
Mahato	57.69%	19.23%	23.08%	100.0%
Muslim	73.53%	17.65%	8.82%	100.0%
Yadav	80.77%	19.23%	0.00%	100.0%
Others	80.88%	9.56%	9.56%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Sahajadi Khatun, an 11-year-old female student from a moderate-income family in Nepal, is experiencing the positive impact of the government's mid-day meal scheme at Adharbhut Ma Vi, Ward No. 4, Durgabhagwati Municipality. This case study highlights the effectiveness of the initiative in providing free and nutritious meals to students from Early Childhood Development (ECD) 1 to 5, enabling Sahajadi to thrive academically and nutritionally. The government's mid-day meal scheme has been seamlessly implemented at Sahajadi's school, ensuring regular and consistent meals during lunchtime. Sahajadi confirms the high availability of meals, reflecting the success of the program in addressing nutrition-related barriers to education and fostering a conducive learning environment. Sahajadi expresses utmost contentment with the diverse and nutritious meals provided under the scheme. The range of dishes, including Khichadi, Chowmin, Haluwa, Potato, Beaten Rice, Kheer, Pulaw, and biscuits, showcases the program's commitment to offering a balanced and appealing menu to students. She said the midday meal holds immense importance. She recognizes the direct impact of regular meals on her health and academic performance. Coming from a moderate-income family, Sahajadi's inclusion in the program exemplifies its role in promoting social equity. The provision of free meals relieves Sahajadi from the burden of bringing food to school, fostering a stress-free environment that allows her to focus entirely on her studies and personal growth.

Sahajadi Khatun's case reflects the program's effectiveness in targeting students in Grades 1–5, a crucial age group for cognitive and physical development. By providing nutritious meals, the scheme enhances students' attentiveness, participation, and overall learning experiences. Sahajadi Khatun's experience illustrates the positive impact of Nepal's mid-day meal scheme on young learners. The initiative's successful implementation, availability of nutritious meals, and recognition of its importance have created a nurturing environment for Sahajadi's academic growth and overall well-being. By promoting social inclusion, reducing barriers to education, and fostering better nutrition, the scheme serves as a powerful tool for improving education outcomes and empowering children like Sahajadi to achieve their full potential in Nepal.

4.2.3 Mother tongue-based Multilingual Education Program

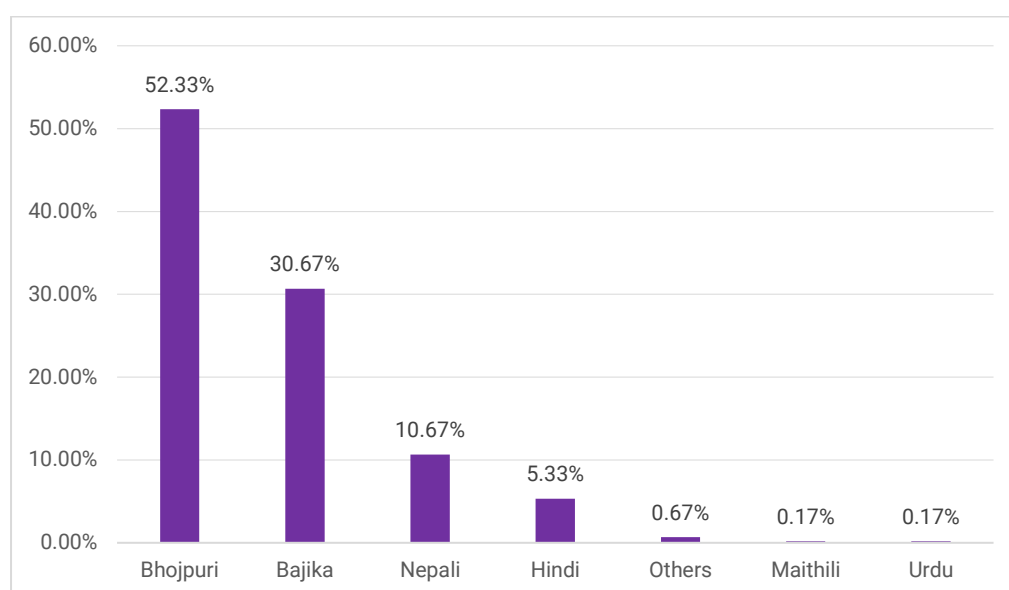
Nepal has introduced a Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program, which ensures that the medium of instruction in schools is the mother tongue or the first language of the students. The implementation of the MTB-MLE policy aims to address linguistic diversity within the country and promote inclusive education by recognizing the significance of children's mother tongue or home language in the learning process. This section will assess whether mother tongue-based multilingual education programs have been carried out in the context of public schools of Rautahat district.

4.2.3.1 Primary language is spoken in households

The graph shows the primary languages spoken in households providing valuable insights into the linguistic composition of the region. The most prominent primary language spoken in households is Bhojpuri, accounting for a significant percentage of 52.33%. Bajika emerges as the second most common primary language spoken in households, with a percentage of 30.67%. Nepali is spoken as the primary language in 10.67% of households, Hindi in 5.33% of households, and Maithili and

Urdu is spoken in 0.17% of households. A small percentage (0.67%) falls under the category of "Others," which implies the existence of additional languages spoken within the population that are not specifically mentioned in the given data. Overall, the data portrays a diverse linguistic background within the studied population. Bhojpuri and Bajika are the most prevalent languages, followed by Nepali and Hindi.

Figure 4.7 Primary language spoken in the household



Source: Field Survey, 2023

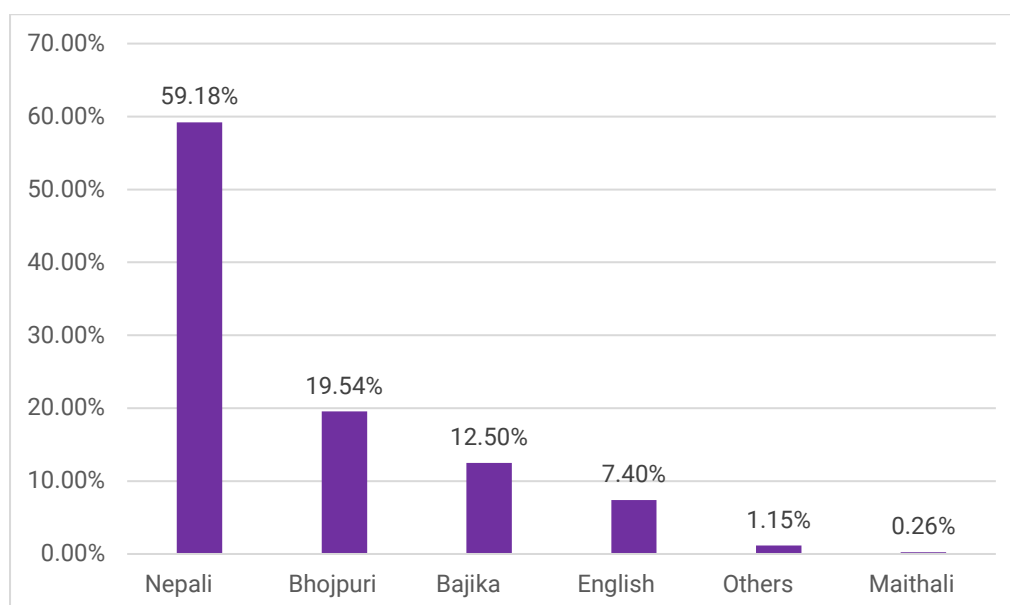
4.2.3.2 Availability of mother-tongue-based multilingual education programs

The graph provides valuable insights into the language preferences and educational practices within the region, particularly regarding the languages used for curriculum instruction in school. Nepali emerges as the predominant language of instruction in schools, with a significant percentage of 59.18%, which suggests that the Nepali language holds a prominent position in the educational system, potentially as the official language of instruction. Bhojpuri follows as the second most frequently taught language, with a percentage of 19.54%, whereas Bajika is the third most commonly taught language, with 12.50%. English, at 7.40%, is taught in a smaller percentage of schools. The category labeled "Others" accounts for 1.15%, which implies that there are additional regional or minority languages taught in some schools. Maithali is taught in schools with a minimal percentage of 0.26%.

Comparing the primary languages spoken in households with the languages taught in schools, we can observe that Bhojpuri and Bajika, which have significant

representation in households, are also among the languages taught in schools. This aligns with the concept of multilingual education Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), which emphasizes providing education in languages spoken by local communities. However, the lower percentage of Nepali as a primary household language compared to its prominence in schools indicates that Nepali may be more prevalent as a language of instruction than a language spoken in everyday household contexts. It suggests that the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy may not be fully realized, indicating a potential gap between the language practices in households and the language choices made in the educational system. This gap raises concerns about the equitable implementation of the MTB-MLE policy. It suggests that the intended goal of providing education in students' mother tongue may not be fully realized for all linguistic communities, which is necessary to promote equitable access to quality education for all students.

Figure 4.8 Language taught in school



Source: Field Survey, 2023

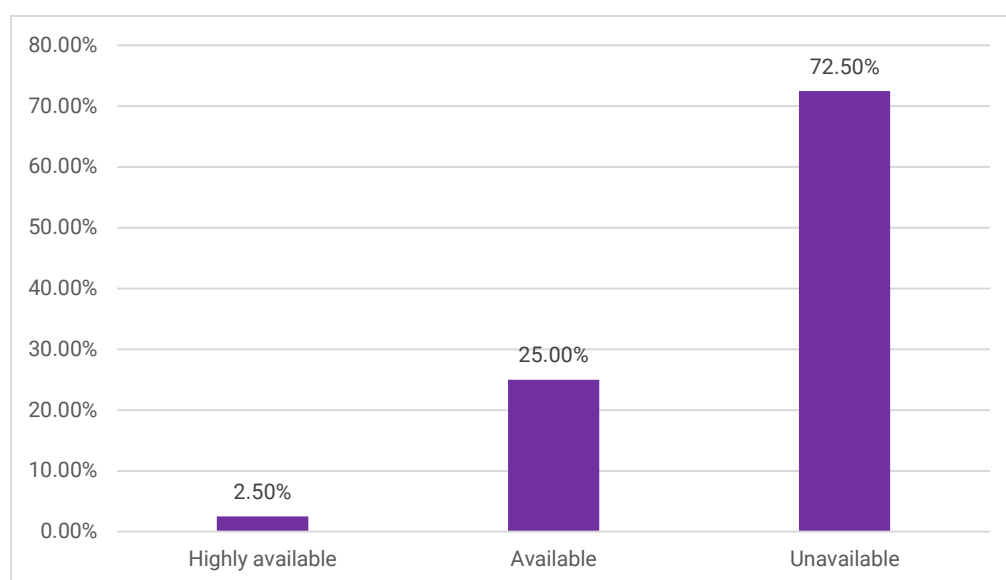
4.2.4 Disability-friendly Infrastructure

According to the School Education Sector Plan 2022–2032 of Nepal, one of the key strategies to improve the physical and educational environments of schools is to ensure that children can participate in learning activities in a disability-friendly environment. The plan also aims to implement the inclusive education roadmap to ensure that children with functional limitations are supported to engage in the most inclusive form of education possible and that schools are strengthened to cater to the identified needs of these children. This section assesses whether the public school has the infrastructure to accommodate people with disabilities.

4.2.4.1 Availability of Disability-Friendly Infrastructure

The graph indicates that only a small percentage (2.50%) of the infrastructure is highly accessible to disabled individuals, while a larger portion (25.00%) is somewhat accommodating. However, the majority (72.50% of the infrastructure) remains completely inaccessible to disabled individuals. This lack of accessibility can lead to the exclusion and marginalization of disabled individuals, as evident from the low percentage of disabled students enrolled in schools during the field visit. It suggests that the unavailability of disabled-friendly infrastructure might be a significant contributing factor to this disparity. Overall, the analysis reveals that there is a substantial disparity in the availability of disabled-friendly infrastructure, highlighting a lack of inclusivity and representation of the needs of people with disabilities. While some progress has been made with the “available” category, a considerable portion of infrastructure remains inaccessible, leading to the potential exclusion and marginalization of disabled individuals. Policymakers, urban planners, and decision-makers must prioritize and invest in making infrastructure more accessible. This includes addressing physical barriers, installing ramps, elevators, widened doorways, and other accessibility features in public spaces, school buildings, and transportation systems. Disability-friendly infrastructure in public schools is crucial for promoting equity in education by ensuring equal access to opportunities, full participation, and inclusion for all students, leading to better learning outcomes and a more equitable society.

Figure 4.9 Availability of disability-friendly infrastructure



Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.2.5 Separate toilets for males and females

As outlined in the School Education Sector Plan 2022–32 of Nepal, the plan aims to enhance targeted interventions and support the goal of reducing disparities, which include separate toilet facilities for male and female students. The plan emphasizes the importance of separate toilets for male and female students and gender-responsive facilities to ensure a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. This particular section of the plan assesses the availability of separate

toilets for male and female students, taking into account their educational levels and gender.

4.2.5.1 Availability of Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys by Gender

The table shows the availability of separate toilets for girls and boys, categorized as “highly available,” “available,” and unavailable.” For female respondents, 60.7% reported that separate toilets are “highly available”, 27.3% reported that separate toilets are available, and 12.0% reported that separate toilets are unavailable.” For male respondents, 60.7% reported that separate toilets are “highly available”, 27.7% reported that separate toilets are available, and 11.7% reported that separate toilets are unavailable.”

The data shows that both male and female respondents have the same percentage (60.7%) reporting “highly available” separate toilets, indicating a relatively high availability of separate toilet facilities for both genders. The percentage of “available” separate toilets is also similar for both males (27.7%) and females (27.3%). However, there is a slight difference in the percentage of “unavailable” separate toilets, with 12.0% for female students and 11.7% for male students. While the difference is not substantial, it does suggest a slightly higher level of unavailability for female students, which should be addressed to ensure equal access to sanitation facilities. The data suggest that while there is generally good availability of separate toilets for girls and boys in public schools, there are still areas for improvement. Addressing the slight disparity in unavailability and ensuring the quality and functionality of the facilities will be essential steps toward achieving equitable access to sanitation for all students, regardless of their gender.

Table 4.5 Availability of Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys by Gender

Gender	Separate toilets for girls and boys (Availability)			Total
	Highly available	Available	Unavailable	
Female	60.7%	27.3%	12.0%	100.0%
Male	60.7%	27.7%	11.7%	100.0%
Total	60.7%	27.5%	11.8%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.2.5.2 Availability of Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys across Grades

The table represents the availability of separate toilets for girls and boys across the different grades. The highest percentage of highly available separate toilets for girls and boys is observed in grade 8 at 69.1%, followed closely by grade 7 at 68.4% and grade 6 at 67.9%. Grades 5 and 3 also have a relatively high percentage of highly available facilities, with 58.7% and 54.6%, respectively, whereas Grade 4 falls slightly below the 60% mark, with 52.9% reporting highly available separate toilets. From the data, we can see a general upward trend in the availability of separate toilets as the grade level increases. This could indicate that schools are making efforts to improve facilities for older students, and higher grades generally have better infrastructure in place. Moving to the availability category, Grade 4 has the highest percentage of available separate toilets at 36.1%, followed by grades 5 and 3 at around 31%, and Grade 8 at 23.5%. On the other hand, grade 3 has the highest percentage of schools

reporting no separate toilets for girls and boys at 15.1%, followed by grade 7 at 15.2%. These findings highlight the need for targeted efforts to improve the availability of separate toilets in schools, particularly for grades 3 and 7.

Overall, the data suggest that the availability of separate toilets for girls and boys improves as the grade level increases. However, there are still a notable number of schools, particularly in the lower grades (grade 3), where separate toilet facilities are unavailable. This raises concerns about gender equity and access to basic sanitation infrastructure for younger students. Investing in school infrastructure, particularly in primary education, is crucial to ensuring equitable access to safe and hygienic facilities for all students, while efforts should also be made to maintain and improve existing facilities in higher grades to sustain the positive trend of separate toilets for girls and boys.

Table 4.6 Availability of Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys across Grades

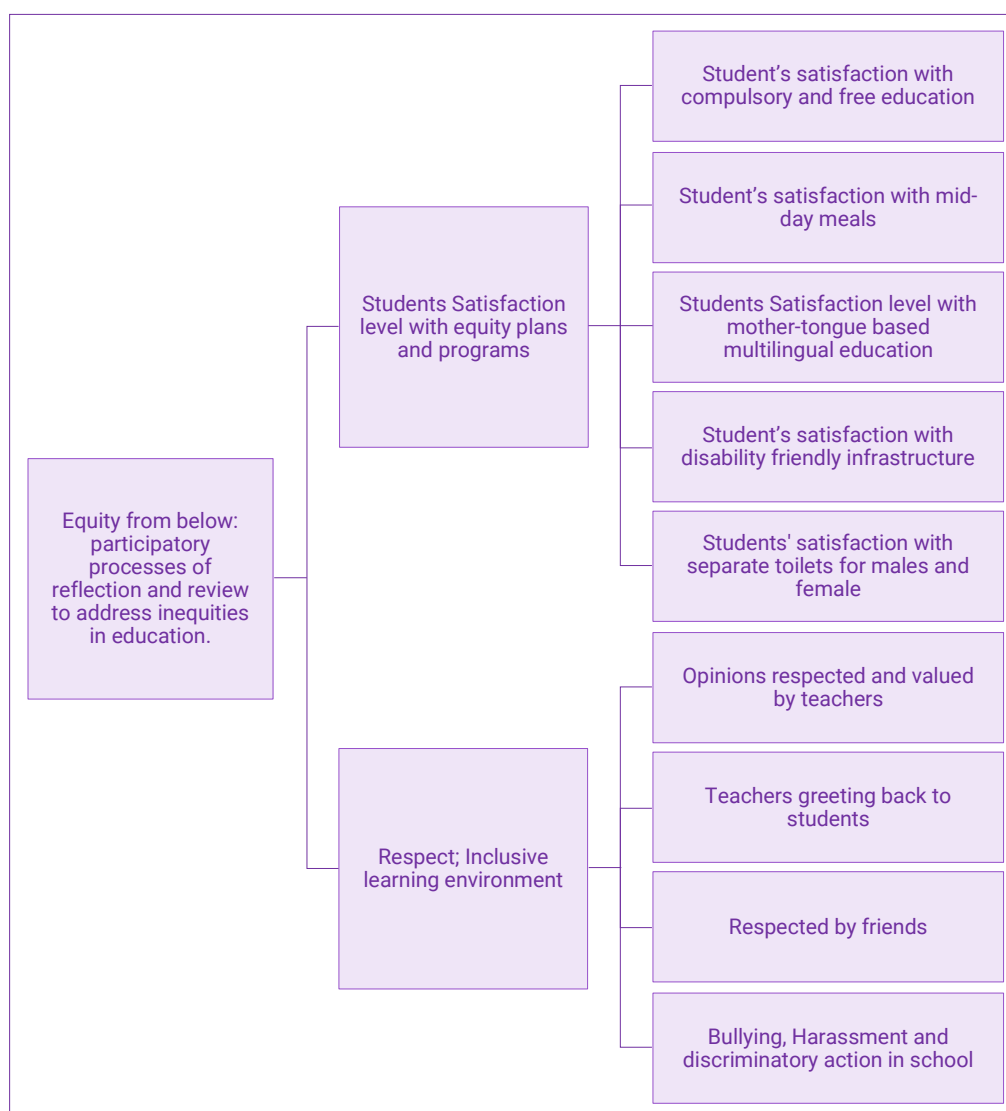
Grade	Separate toilets for girls and boys (Availability)			Total
	Highly available	Available	Unavailable	
3	54.6%	30.3%	15.1%	100.0%
4	52.9%	36.1%	10.9%	100.0%
5	58.7%	31.4%	9.9%	100.0%
6	67.9%	19.8%	12.3%	100.0%
7	68.4%	16.5%	15.2%	100.0%
8	69.1%	23.5%	7.4%	100.0%
Total	60.7%	27.5%	11.8%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3 Measuring equity from below

This section focuses on evaluating the satisfaction of students with specific equitable plans, programs, and practices at the individual level. The aim is to determine whether these programs, as outlined in official documents, have effectively met the diverse needs of individuals. Nepal is a diverse country; it is crucial to evaluate whether these policies have truly fostered an inclusive environment beyond mere availability. The assessment delves into satisfaction levels at the core individual level, considering the varying needs, heterogeneity, and preferences of students, and seeks to understand the effectiveness of these policies in providing equitable opportunities. By analyzing individual satisfaction levels, we can gauge the actual impact of these policies and programs on students from different backgrounds. This analysis goes beyond mere implementation statistics and dives into the real experiences and perceptions of students, ensuring that equity is truly being upheld in educational practices.

Figure 4.10 Measurement of equity from below



4.3.1 Students' satisfaction level with compulsory and free education policies

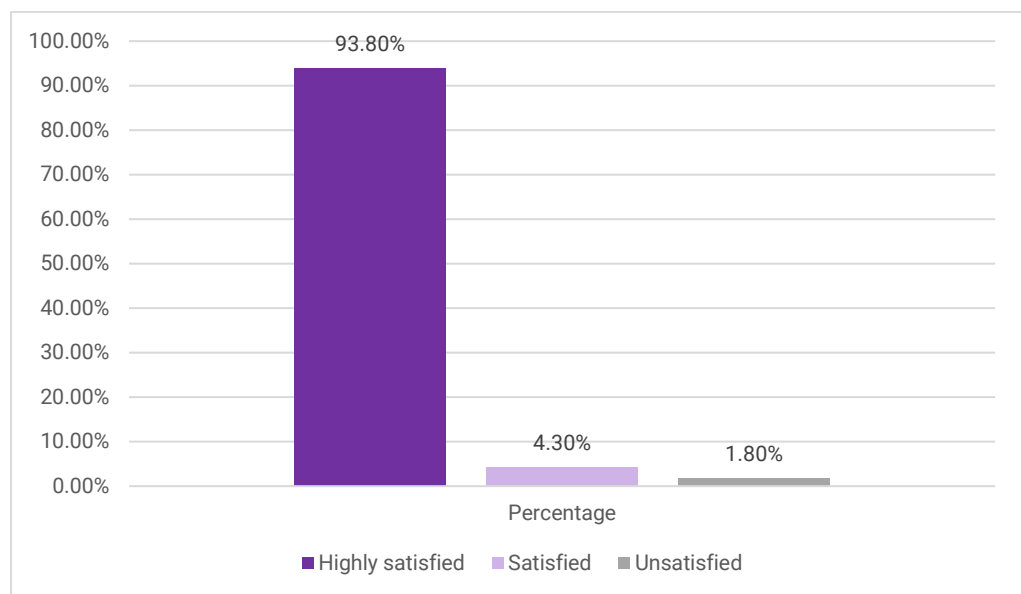
This section analyzes the satisfaction level of students from diverse backgrounds with compulsory and free education. From an equity perspective, it is important to understand people's perspectives and measure satisfaction levels, not just the availability of equity plans, programs, and strategies. The effectiveness of the implementation of compulsory and free education policies and whether they've been able to cater to a diverse group of people could be understood by evaluating the satisfaction levels of students belonging to distinct gender, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, as outlined in the following.

4.3.1.1 Student's satisfaction with compulsory and free education policies

The figure illustrates the varying levels of satisfaction with compulsory and free education. The study indicates that a significant majority of respondents, comprising 93.80%, reported a high level of satisfaction. A smaller proportion, 4.30%, expressed satisfaction, while only 1.80% reported being unsatisfied with the education policy. The

high satisfaction rate suggests that the compulsory and free education policies have effectively met the expectations and requirements of a large majority of respondents, delivering a satisfactory educational experience. Although the percentage of unsatisfied individuals is relatively low, it is essential to recognize their concerns and experiences. Their dissatisfaction emphasizes the need to address any existing shortcomings or challenges in policy implementation to ensure that the education system caters to the diverse needs of all individuals, promoting a more equitable learning environment. This highlights the success of the policy in providing access to education and accentuates the importance of continuous efforts to improve and meet the satisfaction of all individuals.

Figure 4.11 Students' Satisfaction level with Compulsory and free education

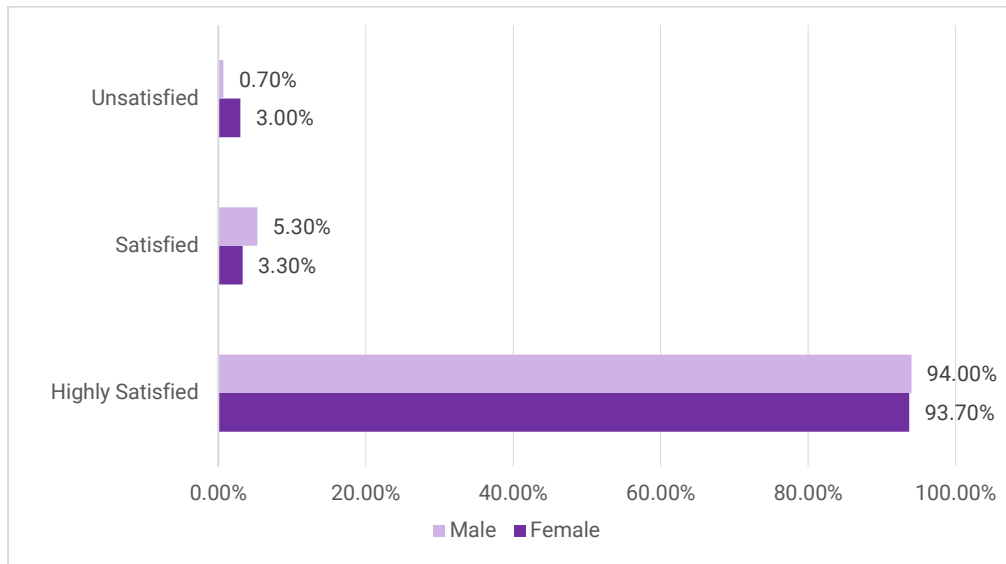


Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.1.2 Gender-based Analysis of Satisfaction with Compulsory and Free Education Policies

The graph represents the different levels of satisfaction with compulsory and free education, categorized by gender. Among female respondents, 93.7% reported being highly satisfied, 3.3% expressed satisfaction, and 3.0% indicated being unsatisfied with the education policy. Similarly, among male respondents, 94.0% reported high satisfaction, 5.3% expressed satisfaction, and only 0.7% reported being unsatisfied. The data reveals a slightly higher proportion of satisfied responses among male respondents compared to female respondents. In general, the data shows a high level of satisfaction with compulsory and free education among both female and male respondents, with 93.8% of the total respondents reporting high satisfaction. This indicates the success and effectiveness of the policy in meeting the expectations and requirements of the majority of individuals. However, it is also important to prioritize addressing the concerns of the small group of unsatisfied respondents and further enhance the implementation of the policy, ensuring equitable access to education and fostering satisfaction for all individuals.

Figure 4.12 Gender - based Analysis of Satisfaction with Compulsory and Free Education Policy



Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.1.3 Ethnicity-based Analysis of Satisfaction with Compulsory and Free Education Policies

The table shows the different levels of satisfaction with compulsory and free education policies, categorized by ethnicity. Among Brahmin respondents, 86.8% reported being highly satisfied, while 13.2% expressed satisfaction with the education policy. Similarly, among Chettri respondents, 87.5% reported high satisfaction, with 12.5% expressing satisfaction. The majority of Dalit respondents (92.42%) reported being highly satisfied with compulsory and free education, while 4.55% expressed satisfaction and 3.33% reported being unsatisfied. Mahato ethnic group respondents showed a high satisfaction rate, with 97.8% reporting being highly satisfied and 2.2% expressing satisfaction.

Among Muslim respondents, 93.8% reported being highly satisfied, 3.1% expressed satisfaction, and 3.1% reported being unsatisfied. Similarly, Yadav respondents had a high level of satisfaction, with 94.6% being highly satisfied and 5.4% expressing satisfaction. For the "Others" category, 95.0% of the respondents reported being highly satisfied, 3.2% expressed satisfaction, and 1.83% reported being unsatisfied. Overall, the data demonstrate a positive perception of compulsory and free education among respondents from various ethnic backgrounds. The high satisfaction levels signify the effectiveness of the policy in meeting the educational needs and expectations of the majority of ethnic groups. However, to ensure equity, policymakers should focus on addressing the concerns of the relatively smaller percentage of unsatisfied individuals from marginalized communities like Dalits and Muslims. It is essential to consider the experiences of those who reported being unsatisfied and work towards addressing their concerns to ensure equitable access and satisfaction for all individuals across different ethnicities.

Table 4.7 Ethnicity-based Analysis of Satisfaction with Compulsory and Free Education Policy

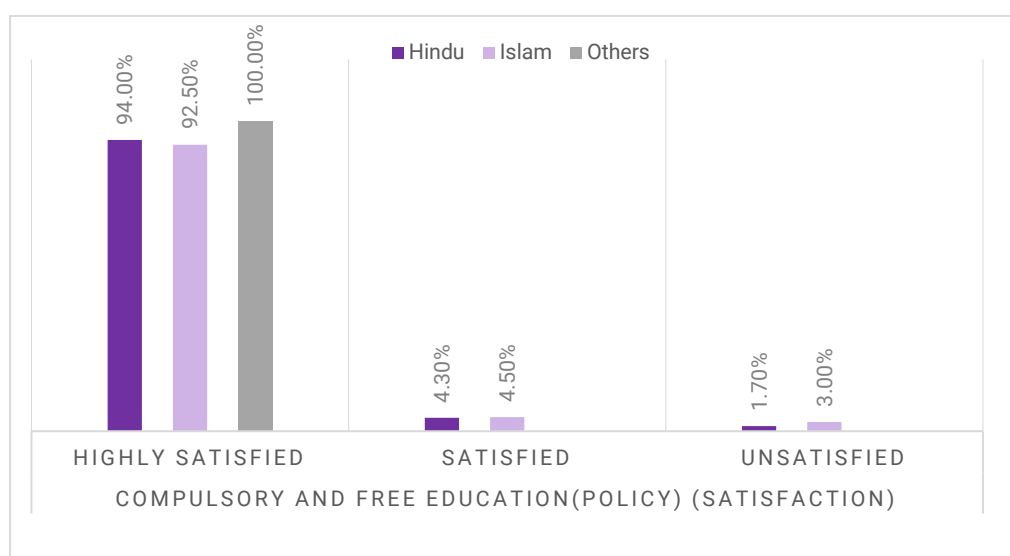
Ethnicity	Compulsory and free education (Satisfaction)			Total
	Highly satisfied	Satisfied	Unsatisfied	
Brahmin	86.80%	13.20%	0.00%	100.00%
Chettri	87.50%	12.50%	0.00%	100.00%
Dalit	92.42%	4.55%	3.30%	100.00%
Mahato	97.80%	0.00%	2.20%	100.00%
Muslim	93.80%	3.10%	3.10%	100.00%
Yadav	94.60%	5.40%	0.00%	100.00%
Others	95.00%	3.20%	1.83%	100.00%
Total	93.80%	4.30%	1.80%	100.00%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.1.4 Religion-Based Analysis of Satisfaction with Compulsory and Free Education Policies

The graph depicts the various levels of satisfaction with the compulsory and free education policies, categorized by religion. Among Hindu respondents, 94.0% reported being highly satisfied, 4.3% expressed satisfaction, and only 1.7% reported being unsatisfied with the education policy. Similarly, among Muslim respondents, 92.5% reported high satisfaction, 4.5% expressed satisfaction, and 3.0% reported being unsatisfied. For the "Others" category, 100% of the respondents reported being highly satisfied, indicating a positive perception of the policy's impact within this religious group. The overall data reveals a positive perception of compulsory and free education among respondents from different religious groups. The high satisfaction rates suggest the effectiveness of the policy in meeting the educational needs and expectations of the majority. However, it is crucial to take into account and attend to the concerns of the minority who expressed dissatisfaction. Continuous efforts should be made to enhance the implementation of the policy, aiming to guarantee equal access and satisfaction for individuals from diverse religious backgrounds.

Figure 4.13 Religion and Satisfaction of Compulsory and free education



Source: Field Survey, 2023

Pratima Kumari Sah is a 16-year-old female student belonging to the Dalit community in the Yamunamai Rural Municipality of Nepal. She attends Shree Yamunamai School in Jhunkunwa and is currently in the eighth grade. Pratima's family has a monthly income of 20,000 rupees or above, placing them above the poverty line. However, as a Dalit student, Pratima belongs to a historically marginalized group facing social and economic disadvantages. She reports that compulsory and free education is highly available in her community. This suggests that the local government and education authorities have made significant efforts to ensure that education is accessible to all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background. She expresses high satisfaction with the compulsory and free education provided in her community. Pratima's positive experience indicates that the education system in Yamunamai Rural Municipality has been successful in meeting the needs and expectations of students like her. She also considers compulsory and free education extremely important. This understanding demonstrates her recognition of the value of education in her personal growth and future prospects. Pratima recognizes the importance of education in breaking the cycle of poverty and discrimination and allowing her to pursue her dreams and make a meaningful impact in society. Her case demonstrates how free education contributes to equal access to education. Despite facing challenges as a marginalized individual, Pratima has the opportunity to attend school and receive an education. Free education ensures fairness by providing equal opportunities to students from diverse backgrounds and addressing social inequalities. Through compulsory and free education, Pratima gains access to knowledge, skills, and opportunities that empower her and promote social mobility. Education equips her with the necessary tools to think critically, make informed decisions, and pursue higher education or vocational training. By breaking the barriers of discrimination and poverty, Pratima has the potential to improve her socio-economic status, achieve her aspirations, and become a catalyst for positive change within her community. Pratima's case exemplifies the significance of free education in ensuring equitable access to education. The availability of compulsory and free education in Yamunamai Rural Municipality has provided Pratima, a Dalit student from a relatively low-income family, with the opportunity to pursue her education without financial constraints. The case study emphasizes the transformative power of education in empowering individuals, promoting social mobility, and fostering a more inclusive and just society.

4.3.2 Student Satisfaction Levels with Mid-Day Meals

This section assesses the successful execution of the mid-day meal programs within schools, examining whether their implementation meets the intended goals. Additionally, it examines whether students from various backgrounds, encompassing gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliations, express satisfaction with the provided meals.

4.3.2.1 Student Satisfaction Levels with Mid-Day Meals

The above table represents respondents' satisfaction levels with mid-day availability in schools. The majority of respondents, 76.32%, reported being highly satisfied, while 13.09% reported being satisfied, and 10.58% reported being unsatisfied. The data suggests that the majority of respondents hold a favorable view of the mid-day meals, showcasing the significance of delivering quality meals that meet the expectations and nutritional needs of the students. It is crucial to acknowledge the existence of a dissatisfied minority, which highlights the importance of addressing their concerns and feedback. Overall, the analysis underlines the significance of providing high-quality midday meals that cater to the diverse preferences and needs of the students. The program's effectiveness and significance are evident from the positive satisfaction

levels, but by addressing the concerns of unsatisfied participants, further enhancements can be made, ensuring that all students derive maximum benefits from the mid-day meal program. To enhance equity in the mid-day meal program, measures such as feedback, cultural sensitivity, quality improvement, and targeted support can be implemented to create a more inclusive and equitable experience for all students.

Table 4.8 Student Satisfaction levels with mid-day meals

Mid-day meal (Satisfaction)	Percentage (%)
Highly satisfied	76.32%
Satisfied	13.09%
Unsatisfied	10.58%
Total	100.00%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.2.2 Gender-Based Analysis of Student Satisfaction with Mid-Day Meals

The table presents an analysis of the satisfaction levels with the mid-day meal scheme based on gender, categorized into three levels: “Highly Satisfied,” “Satisfied,” and “Unsatisfied. Among female respondents, the majority, approximately 77.90%, expressed being “highly satisfied” with the mid-day meals. Additionally, 12.15% of females reported being “satisfied,” while 9.94% indicated feeling “unsatisfied” with the mid-day meals. Of male respondents, approximately 74.72% stated being “highly satisfied” with the mid-day meals, which is slightly lower than the percentage among females. Around 14.04% of males reported being “satisfied,” while 11.24% expressed feeling “unsatisfied” with the scheme. A considerable proportion of respondents expressing high satisfaction demonstrates the mid-day meal program’s efficacy in meeting the nutritional and educational needs of school-going children. However, it is equally important to address the concerns of those who feel unsatisfied. Policymakers can identify the reasons behind their dissatisfaction and implement focused enhancements to improve overall satisfaction and program effectiveness. To achieve equitable access to mid-day meals, education authorities must consider gender-specific concerns, foster open communication, ensure consistent quality and cultural sensitivity, and adopt measures to rectify disparities, ultimately creating a more inclusive and equitable program.

Table 4.9 Gender-Based Analysis of Student Satisfaction with Mid-day Meals

Gender	Mid-day meals (Satisfaction)			Total
	Highly Satisfied	Satisfied	Unsatisfied	
Female	77.90%	12.15%	9.94%	100.0%
Male	74.72%	14.04%	11.24%	100.0%
Total	76.32%	13.09%	10.59%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.2.3 Student Satisfaction with Midday Meals Based on Religion

The table presents an analysis of the satisfaction levels with the mid-day meal programs among different religious groups, categorized into “highly satisfied,” “satisfied,” and “unsatisfied.” Among Hindu respondents, 76.32% expressed being “highly satisfied”, 3.71% expressed being satisfied, and 9.96% reported being

“unsatisfied” with mid-day meals. Similarly, among Islam respondents, approximately 77.14% expressed being “highly satisfied”, 5.71 reported being satisfied, and 17.14% expressed being unsatisfied,” which is notably higher among all religious groups. Among the “Others” category, 66.67% expressed being “highly satisfied”, 33.33% reported being satisfied, and none reported being “unsatisfied” with the mid-day meals. The data highlights the importance of addressing the concerns of those who reported feeling unsatisfied,, especially within the Islamic community, where the percentage is relatively higher. Policymakers and schools should carefully examine the feedback from those who expressed lower satisfaction levels to make necessary adjustments and ensure equitable benefits for all students, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Table 4.10 Student Satisfaction with Mid-day Meals Based on Religion

Religion	Mid-day meals (Satisfaction)			Total
	Highly Satisfied	Satisfied	Unsatisfied	
Hindu	76.32%	13.71%	9.96%	100.0%
Islam	77.14%	5.71%	17.14%	100.0%
Others	66.67%	33.3%	0.00%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.2.4 Ethnicity-Based Analysis of Student Satisfaction with Mid-Day Meals

The table represents the satisfaction levels with midday meals among different ethnic groups. Brahmin respondents were 50.00% highly satisfied, 38.89% satisfied, and 11.11% unsatisfied, whereas Chettri respondents were 100.00% highly satisfied, with no one falling into the satisfied or unsatisfied categories. Dalit students show a significant level of satisfaction (79.78% highly satisfied) with the mid-day meals, indicating the program's positive impact on addressing equity for this marginalized group. While the majority of Mahato students are satisfied (61.54%), a considerable proportion (23.08%) express dissatisfaction. This suggests the need for further attention to ensure equitable benefits for all students in this group. Muslim students also demonstrate relatively high satisfaction (76.47% highly satisfied), but a significant percentage (17.65%) still report dissatisfaction. Addressing this gap is crucial to ensuring equitable outcomes for Muslim students. Yadav students exhibit a high level of satisfaction (78.85% highly satisfied), with a minimal percentage (1.92%) expressing dissatisfaction. This indicates positive equity implications for this ethnic group.

The “Others” category includes various ethnicities, and overall, the majority (78.68%) report high satisfaction levels. The data suggests that while the mid-day meal program has made strides in ensuring equity by providing nutritious meals to various ethnic groups, there are still some disparities as certain groups show higher levels of dissatisfaction than others. The government and schools should carefully analyze the reasons behind these disparities and take targeted measures to address them. The measures include ensuring that the meal offerings are culturally sensitive and diverse, catering to the dietary preferences of different ethnic groups, and maintaining consistent quality and nutritional standards of the meals provided to maintain high levels of student satisfaction across all ethnic groups. By implementing these measures, the government can work towards creating a more equitable mid-day meal program that effectively supports the educational well-being of all students, regardless of their ethnic background.

Table 4.11 Ethnicity-based Analysis of Student Satisfaction with Mid-day Meals

Ethnicity	Mid-day meals (Satisfaction)			Total
	Highly Satisfied	Satisfied	Unsatisfied	
Brahmin	50.00%	38.89%	11.11%	100.0%
Chettri	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.0%
Dalit	79.78%	12.36%	7.78%	100.0%
Mahato	61.54%	15.38%	23.08%	100.0%
Muslim	76.47%	5.88%	17.65%	100.0%
Yadav	78.85%	19.23%	1.92%	100.0%
Others	78.68%	9.56%	11.76%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.3 Satisfaction with a mother-tongue-based multilingual education program

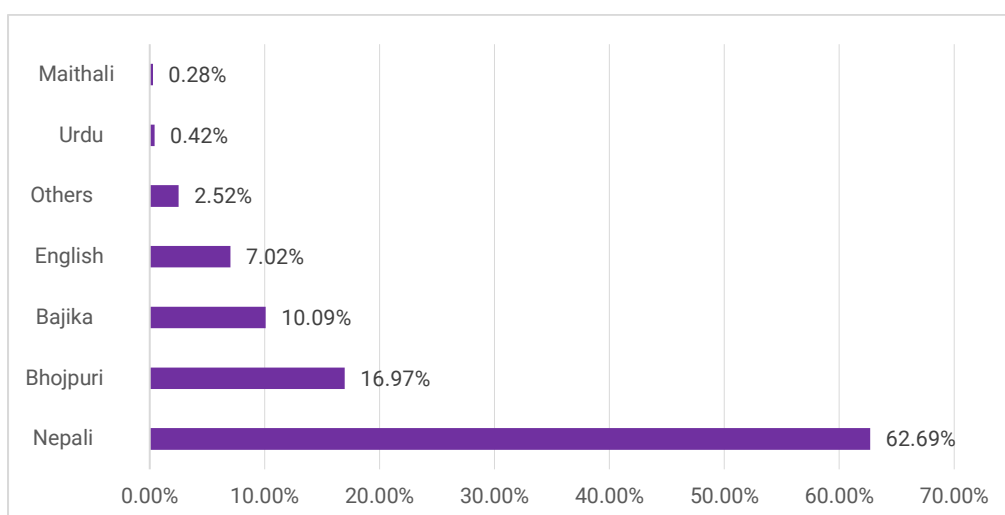
The matter of language within the education system holds significance, particularly in a multilingual nation such as Nepal, where over 123 languages are spoken by diverse indigenous, tribal, and minority groups. This section aims to evaluate the general satisfaction level of students with Nepal's mother tongue-based multilingual education program and their language preference in school.

4.3.3.1 Satisfaction of students with mother-tongue-based multilingual education programs

The figure illustrates the language preferences of students for their school studies. Nepali is the most favored language, chosen by a substantial majority of 62.69% of students. Bhojpuri ranks second with 16.97% while Bajika follows as the third most preferred option with 10.09% of students selecting it. English is preferred by 7.02% of students, while the "Others" category accounts for 2.52%, indicating diverse language choices. Urdu and Maithali, representing 0.42% and 0.28%, respectively, are the least preferred options. Surprisingly, despite Bhojpuri and Bajika being prominent languages spoken at home, students still favor Nepali as the medium of instruction in schools, possibly due to its official status and widespread usage beyond their region. This preference highlights a policy gap, as it reflects the difference between students' language preferences and the existing language policy in schools.

To bridge this gap, the government should implement a bilingual education policy that recognizes both Nepali and the students' primary languages (Bhojpuri and Bajika), providing proper training and resources for teachers to teach in multiple languages. Moreover, schools should offer flexibility in language choice, empowering students to participate actively in their learning process and enhancing their overall satisfaction with the education system. By addressing this policy gap and giving equal importance to both Nepali and students' primary languages, the government can foster an inclusive and equitable education system that values linguistic diversity and caters to the preferences and needs of students. Taking student satisfaction levels into consideration and adjusting language policies accordingly will lead to a more adaptable and effective educational environment.

Figure 4.14 Multilingual Policy and Student Language Preferences



Source: Field Survey, 2023

Barsha Kumari Pandit, an 11-year-old female student in Grade 6 at Shree Jagadamba Adharbut School in Yamunamai Municipality, Jethariya 1, comes from a household where Bhojpuri is the primary language of communication. Barsha mentioned that the school curriculum comprises both Bhojpuri and Nepali, but she expresses her preference to be primarily taught in Nepali, even though Bhojpuri is the dominant language spoken at home. She clearly stated that learning Nepali will be beneficial for her future". Barsha's parents, like many others in the community, are not fluent in Nepali, which limits their confidence when interacting outside their immediate locality. The school has implemented a curriculum taught in both Bhojpuri and Nepal to cater to the linguistic diversity in the region. While the school's curriculum is bilingual, Barsha firmly advocates for learning primarily in Nepali. She highlights that sometimes students struggle to understand Nepali, leading teachers to switch to Bhojpuri for better comprehension. However, she strongly believes that learning Nepali is essential for her future prospects and wishes her teachers would prioritize teaching subjects in Nepali to strengthen her language skills. Barsha acknowledges the significance of Nepali as the national language of Nepal, widely used in official communication, education, and public discourse. She understands that a strong command of Nepali is vital for her to confidently interact with people beyond her community and seize opportunities beyond her hometown. Despite her parents' limited knowledge of Nepali, Barsha is determined to adapt and learn within the larger linguistic landscape to foster her personal growth and development.

The implementation of the mother tongue-based education policy at Shree Jagadamba Adharbut School has been successful. However, Barsha's case highlights a policy gap where students desire more focus on Nepali in their education. This underscores the importance of the school and government allocating additional resources and professional development opportunities to enhance Nepali language instruction. This way, students like Barsha can become proficient in the national language while still valuing and preserving their mother tongues.

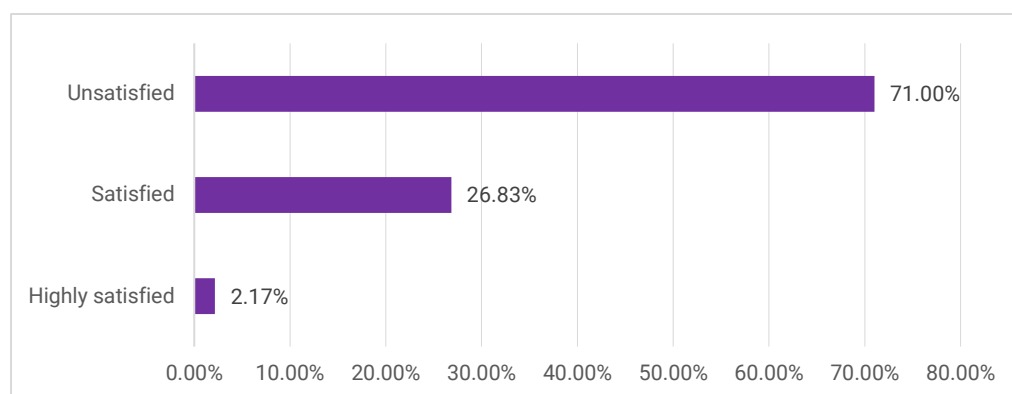
4.3.4 Satisfaction level regarding the availability of disability-friendly infrastructure

The disability-friendly infrastructure is important to create inclusive and equitable environments that cater to the needs of individuals with disabilities. This section evaluates the degree of satisfaction among students regarding the availability of infrastructure that is disability-friendly within public schools.

4.3.4.1 Satisfaction level of students regarding the availability of disability-friendly infrastructure

The graph represents the level of satisfaction with disability friendly infrastructure in public schools. The majority of respondents, 71.00%, expressed being unsatisfied with disability-friendly infrastructure. This high percentage indicates that there are substantial areas for improvement in making the infrastructure more accommodating and inclusive for individuals with disabilities. Only 2.17% of respondents reported being highly satisfied with the disability-friendly infrastructure. This suggests that the current infrastructure may not be meeting the expectations and needs of a vast majority of people with disabilities. While 26.83% of respondents reported being satisfied, this figure still represents a minority of individuals who find the current disability-friendly infrastructure suitable. There is a scope for further enhancements to increase satisfaction levels. The analysis from an equity level underscores the urgent need for improvements in disability-friendly infrastructure to ensure equitable access and satisfaction for individuals with disabilities. By addressing disparities, removing barriers, promoting inclusivity, and involving stakeholders, we can create a more just and accessible built environment that empowers individuals with disabilities to fully participate in all aspects of life. Emphasizing ongoing evaluation and public awareness is fundamental to achieving a more equitable and inclusive environment for everyone.

Figure 4.15 Satisfaction level regarding the availability of disability-friendly infrastructure



Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.5 Satisfaction level with Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys

The separate toilet facilities for girls and boys play a significant role in maintaining hygiene, promoting privacy, and ensuring the comfort of students during their time at school. This section examines the assessment of students' satisfaction level with separate toilet facilities for girls and boys in public schools.

4.3.5.1 Student Satisfaction Levels with Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys Based on Gender

The data presented in the table pertains to the satisfaction levels of separate toilets for girls and boys among females and males. The data is segmented into three categories of satisfaction: Highly satisfied, Satisfied, and Unsatisfied. Overall, 48.0% of all respondents expressed high satisfaction, 29.7% were satisfied, and 22.3% were

unsatisfied with the separate toilets. Upon further examination of the data by gender, it is evident that both females and males exhibit similar levels of satisfaction. Among females, 48.3% reported being highly satisfied, 30.3% were satisfied, and 21.3% were unsatisfied. Among males, 47.7% were highly satisfied, 29.0% were satisfied, and 23.3% were unsatisfied. From an equity perspective, the data indicates that there is relatively little difference in satisfaction levels between males and females regarding separate toilets for boys and girls. The level of dissatisfaction is relatively similar between females and males. Both genders have a considerable proportion of respondents who are unsatisfied with the separate toilets, although the difference in dissatisfaction rates is not substantial. This suggests that both genders are generally content with the provision of such facilities. This equitable distribution of satisfaction implies that efforts to provide separate toilets for males and females have been successful in meeting their needs and promoting inclusivity. However, approximately one-fifth of the respondents are not content with the current provision of facilities which needs to be addressed properly as men and women have different physiological needs, and separate toilets cater to those requirements appropriately. This accommodation helps ensure better hygiene and convenience for everyone. Also, separate toilets for males and females play a vital role in upholding equity, privacy, and inclusivity.

Table 4.12 Student Satisfaction Levels with Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys Based on Gender

Gender	Separate toilets for girls and boys (Satisfaction)			Total
	Highly Satisfied	Satisfied	Unsatisfied	
Female	48.3%	30.3%	21.3%	100.0%
Male	47.7%	29.0%	23.3%	100.0%
Total	48.0%	29.7%	22.3%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.5.2 Student Satisfaction Levels with Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys Based on Grades

The table presents an insightful analysis of satisfaction levels with separate toilets for girls and boys across different grade levels, ranging from Grade 3 to Grade 8. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that satisfaction levels indeed fluctuate among the various grade levels. Notably, Grade 6 stands out with the highest proportion of highly satisfied students (55.6%), indicating a considerable level of contentment with the provided facilities. On the other hand, Grade 4 has the lowest proportion of highly satisfied students (40.3%), suggesting specific concerns or preferences that might need addressing regarding the restroom arrangements. A noteworthy trend is observed in Grades 6, 7, and 8, where a relatively higher proportion of students expressed dissatisfaction (24.7%, 24.1%, and 28.4%, respectively) compared to the overall dissatisfaction rate of 22.3%. This trend might indicate that older students, as they progress to higher grade levels, might develop more specific expectations or requirements for restroom facilities. Contrastingly, Grades 3, 7, and 8 demonstrate consistent levels of satisfaction, with similar proportions of highly satisfied, satisfied, and unsatisfied students. This consistency suggests a degree of uniformity in satisfaction levels within these particular grade levels. Furthermore, the higher levels of dissatisfaction observed among older students (Grades 6, 7, and 8) could point to

potential barriers that impede their satisfaction with the facilities. Identifying these barriers is crucial to promoting equitable access to appropriate and inclusive restroom amenities for all students. In conclusion, this data emphasizes the significance of considering the varying needs and preferences of students across different grade levels when designing and maintaining separate toilets for girls and boys. The findings indicate that younger students generally exhibit higher satisfaction levels, while older students express slightly higher levels of dissatisfaction. To ensure equity, it is essential to address these variations and continuously strive for improvements to promote an inclusive and satisfactory restroom experience for all students, regardless of their grade level or gender identity

Table 4.13 Student Satisfaction Levels with Separate Toilets for Girls and Boys Based on Grades

Grade	Separate toilets for girls and boys (Satisfaction)			Total
	Highly Satisfied	Satisfied	Unsatisfied	
3	46.20%	32.80%	21.00%	100.00%
4	40.30%	40.30%	19.30%	100.00%
5	50.40%	29.80%	19.80%	100.00%
6	55.60%	19.80%	24.70%	100.00%
7	51.90%	24.10%	24.10%	100.00%
8	46.90%	24.70%	28.40%	100.00%
Total	48.00%	29.70%	22.30%	100.00%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6 Respect

Respect plays a vital role in fostering nurturing teacher-student relationships and sustaining productive interactions among students (Down et al., 2006; Held, 2006; Burton & Dunn, 1996). Respect is the foundation for creating an inclusive and equitable environment because it ensures that all individuals are acknowledged and valued for who they are and creating a respectful and inclusive atmosphere in schools is highly significant for students, considering they spend a substantial amount of time there and acquire valuable life lessons. This section assesses the indicators like opinions valued and respected by teachers, teachers greeting back to students, respected by friends, and witnessing or experiencing bullying within schools across individuals from diverse backgrounds, spanning income levels, academic grades, religious affiliations, ethnicities, and genders.

4.3.6.1 Opinions valued and respected by teachers

This section underscores the significance of students perceiving that their opinions hold value and are respected by their teachers. It is vital for students to sense that their opinions are acknowledged by teachers, contributing to an environment of open dialogue. The section comprises the findings and discussions centered on students' perceptions, with a focus on those from diverse backgrounds, including religious groups, ethnic groups, and gender identities.

4.3.6.1.1 Perceptions of Students of different religion regarding valuing and respecting their opinions by Teachers

The table illustrates how teachers regard the opinions of students based on their religious backgrounds. The majority of teachers, irrespective of their students' religious affiliations, show appreciation and respect toward their students' viewpoints. Across all religious groups, there is a clear consensus among students that their opinions are valued and respected by their teachers. Both Hindu and Islam students, in particular, witness an impressive 97.5% of respondents expressing that their teachers genuinely value and respect their opinions. The "Others" category also highlights a remarkable result, with 100% of students reporting that their opinions are valued and respected by their teachers. This remarkable figure indicates a positive and all-embracing educational setting, where teachers willingly listen to and consider their students' perspectives, regardless of their religious beliefs. Overall, the data offers a promising picture of the level of respect exhibited by teachers towards their students' opinions, highlighting their perseverance to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment where students from diverse religious backgrounds feel acknowledged and cherished. However, there is a need to address ongoing efforts to ensure fairness, address any disparities, and create an inclusive educational environment for all students, regardless of their religious affiliation to promote equity.

Table 4.14 Perceptions of Students of different religion regarding valuing and respecting their opinions by Teachers

Religion	Opinions valued and respected by teachers		Total
	No	Yes	
Hindu	2.5%	97.5%	100.0%
Islam	3.0%	97.0%	100.0%
Others	0.00%	100.0%	100.0%
Total	2.5%	97.5%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.1.2 Ethnicity of Students and their Perceived Valuation and Respect for Opinions by Teachers

The table presents how students from various ethnic backgrounds perceive the respect given to their opinions by teachers. Ethnic groups like Chettri report a remarkable 100% agreement, with all students feeling that their opinions are valued and respected by their teachers. Other ethnic groups, such as Brahmin, Dalit, Mahato, Muslim, Yadav, and Others, also display significant percentages of students who perceive their opinions as valued and respected by teachers, ranging from 95.7% to 98.4%. A minority of respondents, comprising 1% to 4% of the total, have expressed that they feel their opinions are not valued or respected by teachers. Looking at the data, some ethnic groups have lower "Yes" percentages compared to others (e.g., Mahato, Muslim, and Yadav), suggesting potential disparities in treatment. From an equity standpoint, it is vital to investigate and address these differences to ensure equal treatment and respect for all ethnic groups. Despite the overall positive results, it remains crucial to address this smaller percentage of students and ensure that they also experience a sense of value and respect for their opinions from teachers. The data highlights the dedication of teachers to fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment

for students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, but there is a need to focus on creating an environment where every student feels heard and appreciated.

Table 4.15 Ethnicity of Students and their Perceived Valuation and Respect for Opinions by Teachers

Ethnicity	Opinions valued and respected by teachers		Total
	No	Yes	
Brahmin	2.6%	97.4%	100.0%
Chettri	0.00%	100.0%	100.0%
Dalit	1.52%	98.48%	100.0%
Mahato	4.3%	95.7%	100.0%
Muslim	3.1%	96.9%	100.0%
Yadav	3.2%	96.8%	100.0%
Others	2.3%	97.7%	100.0%
Total	2.5%	97.5%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.1.3 Gender of students and their Perceived valuation and Respect for Opinion by Teachers

The table presents how students of different genders perceive and experience the value and respect given to their opinions by teachers. It is apparent that the majority of students, regardless of their gender, feel that their opinions are valued and respected by teachers. Both female and male students, an impressive 97.0% and 98.0%, respectively, responded positively, indicating that their opinions are indeed valued and respected by their teachers. However, a small percentage of students, comprising 3.0% of females and 2.0% of males expressed feeling that their opinions are not valued or respected by teachers. The difference is 1% which is relatively small, indicating that both genders have similar perceptions of their opinions being valued and respected by teachers. These findings highlight the existence of a positive and inclusive educational environment where both female and male students feel heard and acknowledged. Nevertheless, it is crucial to address the concerns of this small group of students who do not feel their opinions are valued. Teachers must strive to create an equitable environment where every student, regardless of their gender, feels that their voice holds significance and is treated with respect.

Table 4.16 Gender of students and their perceived valuation and respect for opinion by Teachers

Gender	Opinions valued and respected by teachers		Total
	No	Yes	
Female	3.0%	97.0%	100.0%
Male	2.0%	98.0%	100.0%
Total	2.5%	97.5%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.2 Teachers greeting back to students

The section focuses on how students from different religious affiliations, ethnic backgrounds, and gender identities perceive the responsiveness of teachers in greeting them and creating an inclusive atmosphere within the school premises.

4.3.6.2.1 Ethnicity and Teachers greeting back students

The table presents the responses of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds regarding their perception of how frequently their teachers greet them in the classroom. The overall data indicate that 82.0% of students feel their teachers greet them back all the time, which suggests a significant majority of students have positive perceptions of their teachers' responsiveness. Only 1.0% of students feel their teachers never greet them back, which is a positive sign indicating that a vast majority of teachers are seen as engaging with their students in a welcoming manner. Brahmin, Chhetri, and Dalit students have similar responses, with approximately 75% to 78% of them feeling greeted by their teachers all the time. Mahato and Muslim students also show positive perceptions, with around 82.6% and 90.8%, respectively, feeling greeted all the time. Yadav students' responses are close to the overall average, with 79.6% feeling greeted all the time. However, 18.3% of Yadav students believe their teachers greet them only some of the time, suggesting that there may be room for improvement in teacher-student interactions for this specific group. Furthermore, students grouped under the "Others" category, representing various ethnic groups, report the highest percentage (83.0%) of feeling greeted by their teachers all the time. The data in the table does indeed show that students from various ethnic groups, including those belonging to marginalized communities, have reported similar responses in terms of how frequently teachers greet them. Overall, the data indicates that teachers generally exhibit responsiveness to student greetings, contributing to a positive and nurturing classroom environment. Nevertheless, some ethnic groups have indicated that their teachers greet them only some of the time, which highlights the need for potential improvements in teacher-student interactions for these groups. From an equity standpoint, educators and institutions need to be mindful of these differences and actively work toward creating a more inclusive and equitable environment. This includes encouraging all teachers to greet students consistently and ensuring that cultural competence and sensitivity are incorporated into classroom practices.

Table 4.17 Ethnicity and Teachers greeting back to students

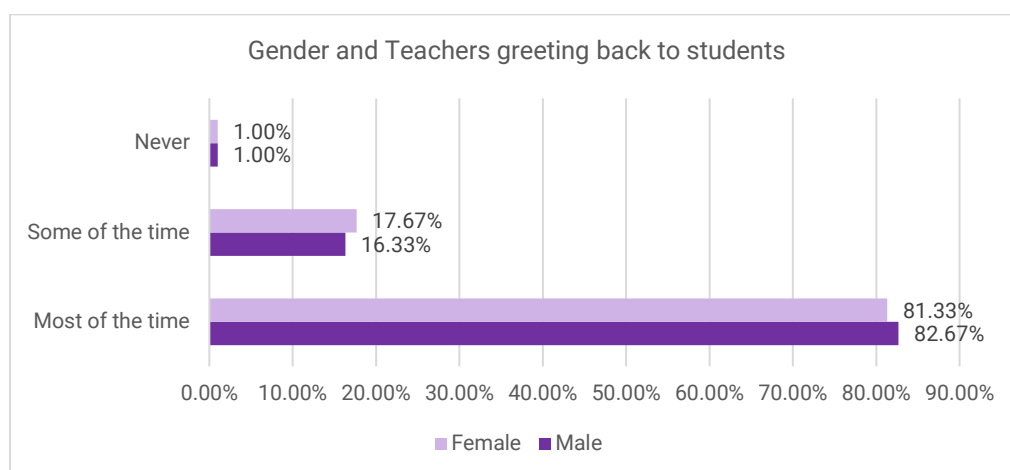
Ethnicity	Teachers greeting back to students			Total
	All the time	Never	Some of the time	
Brahmin	76.3%	2.6%	21.1%	100.0%
Chhetri	75.0%	12.5%	12.5%	100.0%
Dalit	78.0%	.8%	21.1%	100.0%
Mahato	82.6%	0.00%	17.4%	100.0%
Muslim	90.8%	0.00%	9.2%	100.0%
Yadav	79.6%	2.2%	18.3%	100.0%
Others	83.0%	0.5%	16.5%	100.0%
Total	82.0%	1.0%	17.0%	100.0%

Source Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.2.2 Gender and Teachers greeting back to students

The figure displays data related to students' responses based on their gender (female and male) regarding how frequently they perceive their teachers greeting them back in the classroom. It presents the percentages of students who feel greeted by their teachers all the time, some of the time, and never, for each gender group. According to the data, 81.3% of female students report feeling greeted by their teachers most of the time, while 82.67% of male students share the same positive experience. The responses concerning feeling greeted some of the times are similar as well, with female students reporting 17.67% and male students reporting 16.33%. Moreover, a mere 1.0% of both female and male students indicate that their teachers never greet them back. This suggests that there is no significant gender disparity in the perception of teachers' intermittent responsiveness. Overall, the data highlights a positive trend in teacher-student interactions, with approximately 82% of both female and male students consistently feeling greeted by their teachers. This finding reflects a generally positive and inclusive classroom environment for students of all genders. However, to promote true equity, schools must continue to monitor and improve teacher-student interactions, making sure that all students receive equitable treatment and feel respected and valued in the learning environment.

Figure 4.16 Gender and Teachers greeting back to students



Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.2.3 Grade and Teacher greeting back to students

The table offers valuable insights into how students from different grades perceive their teachers' greetings in the classroom. The data is categorized by grade levels, ranging from 3 to 8. The majority of students from all grades feel that their teachers greet them back in the classroom. Grades 5, 7, and 8 exhibit the highest percentages, with 86.8%, 84.8%, and 87.7%, respectively, reporting that teachers greet them all the time. Grades 3 and 4 also show positive outcomes, with 77.8% and 79.8% of students feeling greeted by their teachers all the time. While slightly lower than the percentages for grades 5, 7, and 8, these numbers still indicate a noteworthy level of positive teacher-student interactions in these classes. However, Grade 6 has a relatively lower percentage (76.5%) of students who feel greeted all the time. The data also reveals that the perception of teachers greeting students back some of the time ranges from

12% to 21%, which represents a smaller percentage but highlights the importance of consistent responsiveness from teachers. On the bright side, the perception of teachers never greeting students back is generally quite low across all grades, ranging from 0.8% to 2.5%. This is a positive indication, suggesting that very few students, regardless of their grade level, experience unresponsive behavior from their teachers in terms of greetings. To promote equity, schools must actively work to ensure that all students receive the same level of respect and acknowledgment from teachers, regardless of their grade level. Consistency in teacher-student interactions is crucial for fostering a positive and equitable learning environment.

Table 4.18 Grade and Teacher getting back to students

Grade	Teachers greeting back to students			Total
	All the time	Never	Some of the time	
3	77.3%	0.8%	21.8%	100.0%
4	79.8%	0.8%	19.3%	100.0%
5	86.8%	0.8%	12.4%	100.0%
6	76.5%	2.5%	21.0%	100.0%
7	84.8%	1.3%	13.9%	100.0%
8	87.7%	0.00%	12.3%	100.0%
Total	82.0%	1.0%	17.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.3 Respected by friends

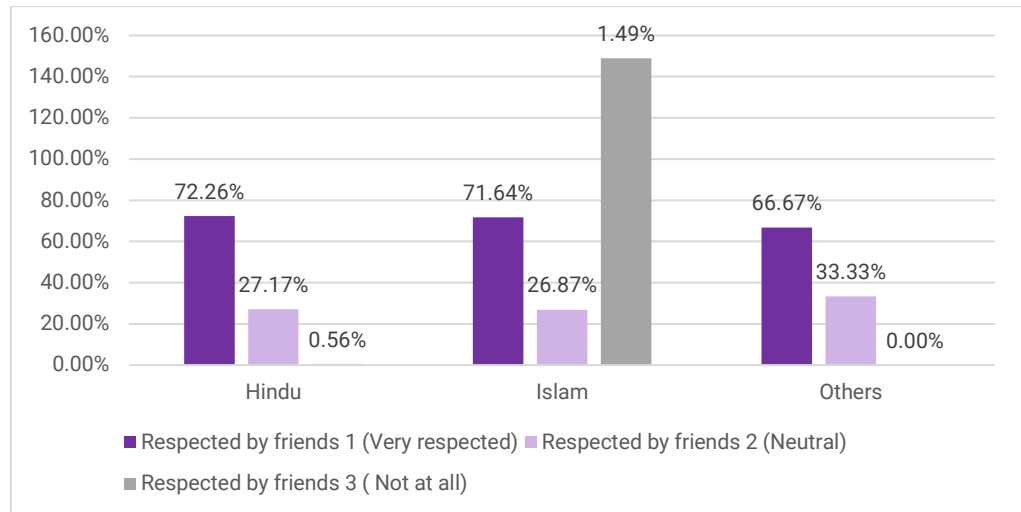
This section examines the dynamics of how students perceive and experience respect from their fellow friends within the school environment. This evaluates the experiences of students who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, gender identities, income-status, and age groups.

4.3.6.3.1 Religion and respected by friends

The figure presents data on how respected different religious groups feel by their friends in school, based on responses from respondents. The table shows that the majority of respondents from all religious groups feel respected by their friends in school. Both Hindu and Muslim students stand out with relatively higher levels of perceived respect at 72.26% and 71.6% respectively, indicating a positive and supportive environment for these religious groups. On the other hand, the "Others" category, which likely includes various religious groups, also reports a substantial level of respect, with 66.67% of respondents feeling respected by their friends. The percentage of students who responded neutral from the Hindu religious group is 27.17% while for the Islamic group, it is 26.87%, and for the "Others" category, it is 33.3%. This table indicates a positive overall trend, with a minimal percentage of students feeling "Not at all respected" (0.56% for Hindus, 1.49% for Muslims, and unreported for Others). This suggests that in general, religious diversity does not appear to be a significant source of conflict or disrespect within the school environment. However, even one student experiencing disrespect based on their religious beliefs is a major concern so, teachers must create a space to foster an environment where every student feels valued and respected, irrespective of their

religious background. Promoting equity ensures that every student feels respected, valued, and supported, regardless of their faith, and helps build a more harmonious and understanding school community.

Figure 4.17 Religion and Respected by Friends



Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.3.2 Respected by friends based on ethnicity

The table presents data on the perception of respect among different ethnic groups in a school setting. Respondents rated their feelings of respect on a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 being "Very respected," 2 as "Neutral," and 3 as "Not at all respected." Brahmin students feel predominantly respected (68.4%), with a significant portion responding neutrally (28.9%) and a smaller percentage feeling unrespected (2.6%). Chhetri students show a different trend, with only 37.5% feeling very respected, and a considerable majority responding neutrally (62.5%). Dalit students also feel largely respected (69.7%), but a higher proportion responded neutrally (31.7%) compared to Brahmins. Kanu students report high levels of feeling very respected (88.9% and with lower neutral responses. Muslim students have a similar overall average of feeling respected (72.3%), while Yadav students have a majority feeling very respected (75.3%) and a notable neutral response (23.7%), and minimal respected feeling (1.1%). The "Others" category indicates a high sense of respect (72.5%) and a relatively high neutral response (27.1%), with only a minimal percentage not feeling respected (0.5%). Overall, the table signifies that most students from diverse ethnic backgrounds feel respected in school, promoting inclusivity. However, variations in neutral responses suggest potential room for fostering a more inclusive and respectful atmosphere. Schools must actively promote cultural understanding, empathy, and appreciation for diversity to ensure every student feels valued and respected to ensure an equitable school environment.

Table 4.19 Respected by friends based on ethnicity

Ethnicity	Respected by friends			Total
	1 (Very respected)	2 (Neutral)	3 (Not at all)	
Brahmin	68.4%	28.9%	2.6%	100.0%
Chhetri	37.5%	62.5%	0.00%	100.0%
Dalit	69.7%	30.33%	0.00%	100.0%
Mahato	80.4%	19.6%	0.00%	100.0%
Muslim	72.3%	26.2%	1.5%	100.0%
Yadav	75.3%	23.7%	1.1%	100.0%
Others	72.5%	27.1%	0.5%	100.0%
Total	72.2%	27.2%	0.7%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.3.3 Gender and respected by friends

The data presented in the table shows how different genders perceive the level of respect they receive in the school environment. The scale ranges from 1 to 3, with 1 indicating “Very respected,” 2 representing “Neutral,” and 3 signifying “Not at all respected.” The majority of females (74.3%) reported feeling highly respected by their friends, with a smaller percentage responding neutrally (25.3%) and an even smaller fraction feeling not respected at all (0.3%). Among males, 70.0% felt very respected, while 29.0% responded neutrally, and a slightly higher proportion (1.0%) expressed not feeling respected compared to females. The data suggest that both male and female students generally feel respected by their peers. However, there is a slightly higher percentage of females who feel very respected compared to males. On the other hand, a slightly higher proportion of males responded neutrally or indicated not feeling respected at all. This difference could be an area of concern from an equity perspective, as it might indicate that some male students perceive less respect or feel less secure in their peer relationships compared to their female counterparts. Overall, the table indicates a positive picture, as the majority of students feel respected by their friends, contributing to a supportive and inclusive school environment. Nonetheless, it underscores the importance of addressing any instances of neutral or negative responses to ensure equitable treatment for students of all genders.

Table 4.20 Gender and Respected by friends

Gender	Respected by friends			Total
	1 (Very respected)	2 (Neutral)	3 (Not at all)	
Female	74.3%	25.3%	0.33%	100.0%
Male	70.0%	29.0%	1.0%	100.0%
Total	72.2%	27.2%	0.7%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.3.4 Respected by friends according to the parent's income level

The figure provides data on how individuals from different income backgrounds perceive the level of respect they receive. Starting from 1000 to 5000 income levels, 82.69% of people feel a high level of respect from their friends, while 17.31% had a neutral response,

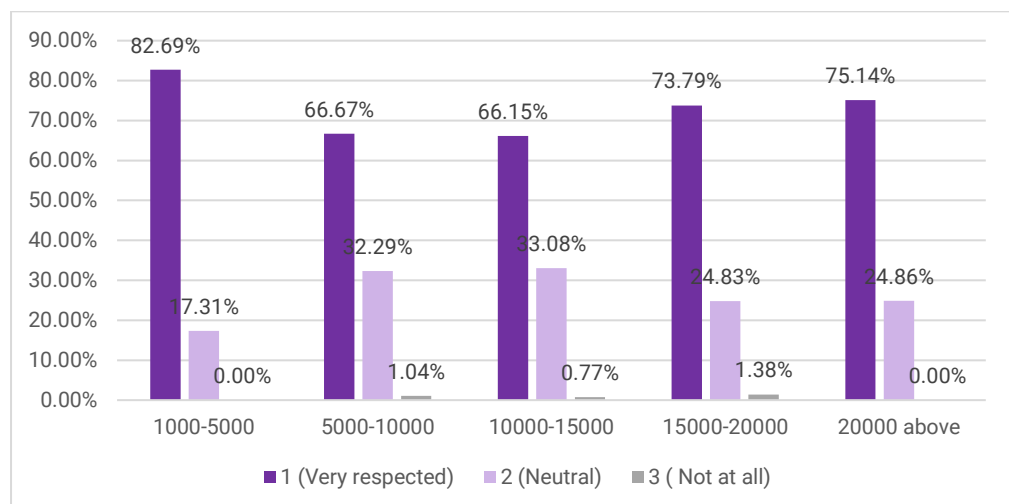
and no one reported feeling disrespected by their friends. Similarly In the 5000–10000 income level, 66.67% of individuals feel very respected by their friends, while 32.29% responded neutrally, and only a minimal percentage of 1.04% indicates not feeling respected at all. Within the income level of 10000–15000, a similar percentage of 66.15% reported feeling very respected, 33.08% responded neutrally, and only a negligible proportion of 0.77% expressed not feeling respected at all.

Among individuals in the 15000–20000 income level, 73.79% feel very respected by their friends, with 24.83% responding neutrally and a slightly higher percentage of 1.38% indicating not feeling respected at all. At the highest income level (20000 and above), the majority of individuals (75.14%) reported feeling very respected, while 24.86% responded neutrally, and there were no reports of not feeling respected at all. The data shows some variation in how individuals from different income groups perceive the level of respect they receive from their friends.

For instance, respondents in the lowest income group (1000–5000) have the highest percentage (82.69%) of respondents who rated their respect as “very respected. This might indicate that the level of respect perceived by peers isn't necessarily linked to their parents' income level or their socioeconomic status. The fact that individuals in the lowest income status reported a high level of respect from their friends indicates that the perception of respect isn't solely determined by economic factors. Other dynamics and aspects likely play a role in how individuals perceive respect from their peers.

From an equity perspective, it is important to consider the factors that might influence how individuals perceive respect from their friends in school. Socioeconomic status and income can impact social interactions and friendships. It is essential to teach students that respect is not based on economic factors and that individuals from all income groups are treated with dignity and valued equally. Overall, the figure reflects a positive outlook, as the majority of individuals at each income level feel respected by their friends. However, the presence of neutral responses across all income groups suggests that there may be room for improvement in fostering a more inclusive, respectful, and equitable environment.

Figure 4.18 Respected by friends according to parent’s income level



Source: Field Survey, 2023

This table presents data on the level of respect children aged 6 to 17 years old receive from their friends, based on three categories: “very respected,” “neutral,” and “not at all. In the 6–8 age group, 70.8% of children are highly respected by their friends, while 29.2% are viewed neutrally. For children aged 9 to 11, the percentage of those highly respected remains high at 72.2%, with 26.7% being perceived neutrally and a small 1.1% falling into the “not at all” category. In the 12 to 14 age group, there is a slightly higher proportion of children receiving “very respected” status, with 74.1%. The percentage of those considered “neutral” decreases to 25.5%, and “not at all” respect is reported for only 0.5% of children.

Among teenagers aged 15 to 17, the percentage of “very respected” declines to 62.1%, while “neutral” responses increase to 37.9%. Similar to the previous age groups, the percentage of children perceived as “not at all” respected remains very low. The data clearly illustrates that the level of respect from friends varies across age groups. The highest proportion of children considered “very respected” is observed in the 12 to 14 age group. However, as children progress into adolescence (15–17 age group), there seems to be a slight decrease in the percentage of children perceived as “very respected,” accompanied by a corresponding increase in those viewed neutrally by their peers. Schools play a vital role in fostering positive social norms and values. Supporting positive peer relationships is crucial to creating an equitable environment, and schools should provide opportunities for students to engage in collaborative activities and build meaningful connections with their peers.

Table 4.21 Age and Respected by friends

Age	Respected by friends			Total
	1 (Very respected)	2 (Neutral)	3 (Not at all)	
6-8	70.8%	29.2%	0.0%	100.0%
9-11	72.2%	26.7%	1.1%	100.0%
12-14	74.1%	25.5%	0.5%	100.0%
15-17	62.1%	37.9%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	72.2%	27.2%	0.7%	100.00%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.4 Bullying, harassment, and discriminatory action in school

In this section, the focus is on evaluating the experiences of students from diverse ethnic, religious, and gender backgrounds. The assessment aims to gain insight into their experiences with regard to instances of bullying, harassment, and discriminatory actions within the school environment.

4.3.6.4.1 Gender-based Experiences of Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination in the School Environment

The table provides data on the prevalence of witnessed or experienced bullying, harassment, or discriminatory actions in school, categorized by gender. It is evident that a significant proportion of students, approximately 16%, have encountered or observed bullying, harassment, or discriminatory actions in their school environment. The overall percentage of students who have experienced or witnessed such incidents is 16.0%. When comparing the data based on gender, we find that the difference is

quite small. Female students reported experiencing or witnessing such incidents at a rate of 16.3%, whereas male students reported a slightly lower rate of 15.7%. This indicates that both female and male students are affected by these issues, and there is no substantial difference in their exposure to bullying, harassment, or discrimination.

While the majority of students (84.0%) have not encountered these negative behaviors, any percentage above zero is cause for concern. The bullying and harassment cases seen in school are boys fighting, verbal abuse, teasing girls, etc. The data emphasizes the need for schools to address these issues proactively and implement strategies that foster a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. Educators, parents, and the broader school community must work together to prevent and address bullying, harassment, and discrimination to ensure the well-being and academic success of all students and maintain an equitable environment for all.

Table 4.22 Gender-based Experiences of Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination in the School Environment

Gender	Witnessed or experienced bullying, harassment, or discriminatory action in school		Total
	No	Yes	
Female	83.7%	16.3%	100.0%
Male	84.3%	15.7%	100.0%
Total	84.0%	16.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.4.2 Ethnicity-based Experiences of Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination in the School Environment

The table provides data on the number of students who witnessed or experienced bullying, harassment, or discriminatory actions in school, categorized by different ethnicities. The data is divided into two categories: “No,” indicating individuals who have not experienced or witnessed such incidents, and “Yes,” representing those who have. The data indicate that 10.5% of Brahmin students reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, harassment, or discrimination in school. This is the lowest percentage among all the ethnic groups, with a majority (89.5%) stating they have not encountered such negative behaviors. Chettri and Yadav also reported relatively low percentages of students who experienced or witnessed bullying, harassment, or discrimination, with 12.5% and 11.8%, respectively. Although the majority (91.1%) of Dalit students reported not experiencing or witnessing negative behaviors, there is a concerning 8.9% who have.

Similarly, 15.2% of Mahato students reported encountering bullying, harassment, or discrimination, while the majority (84.8%) have not experienced these issues. This percentage is higher than some other ethnic groups. The data shows that 27.7% of Muslim students reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, harassment, or discriminatory actions in school. This is the highest percentage among all the ethnic groups, indicating that Muslim students are more likely to be affected by these negative behaviors in the school environment. The category “Others” includes students from various ethnic groups and reports a significant 19.7% of students who have experienced or witnessed negative behaviors, higher than the overall average. In

summary, the data reveals that different ethnic groups experience varying levels of exposure to bullying, harassment, or discriminatory actions.

Some ethnicities, namely Brahmin, Chhetri, and Yadav, exhibit relatively lower percentages of affected students, while others, like Dalit, Mahato, Muslim, and the category “Others,” demonstrate higher percentages. These disparities underscore the importance of schools implementing targeted interventions, fostering cultural sensitivity, and adopting inclusive policies. Collaborative efforts from educators and school administrators are essential to establish a safe, respectful, and equitable environment for all students, irrespective of their ethnicity, and to take proactive measures in addressing and preventing instances of bullying, harassment, and discrimination within educational institutions.

Table 4.23 Ethnicity-based Experiences of Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination in the School Environment

Ethnicity	Witnessed or experienced bullying, harassment, or discriminatory action in school		Total
	No	Yes	
Brahmin	89.5%	10.5%	100.0%
Chhetri	87.5%	12.5%	100.0%
Dalit	91.1%	8.9%	100.0%
Mahato	84.8%	15.2%	100.0%
Muslim	72.3%	27.7%	100.0%
Yadav	88.2%	11.8%	100.0%
Others	80.3%	19.7%	100.0%
Total	84.0%	16.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

4.3.6.5 Religion-based Experiences of Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination in the School Environment

The table presents data on witnessed or experienced bullying, harassment, or discriminatory actions in school, categorized by religion. The data is divided into two categories: No,” indicating individuals who have not experienced or witnessed such incidents, and Yes,” representing those who have. Among Hindu respondents, 14.5% reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, harassment, or discrimination in school, while the majority (85.5%) stated they had not encountered such behaviors. Among Islamic respondents, 26.9% of Muslim students reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, harassment, or discriminatory actions in school. Students from religious backgrounds other than Hinduism and Islam reported a higher incidence of negative behaviors.

Here, approximately 33.3% stated that they had experienced or witnessed bullying, harassment, or discrimination in their school, while 66.7% reported not encountering such incidents. In summary, the data demonstrate that there are variations in the prevalence of bullying, harassment, or discriminatory actions in schools among different religious groups. Muslim students and those from other religious backgrounds (outside Hinduism and Islam) are more likely to experience or witness such incidents compared to Hindu students. Schools must recognize these disparities and take proactive measures to address and prevent these negative behaviors,

ensuring that all students, regardless of their religious beliefs, are provided with a safe and inclusive learning environment.

Overall, analyzing the data through an equity lens highlights the importance of creating an inclusive and respectful school environment that recognizes and addresses the diverse experiences and needs of students from different religious backgrounds. By proactively addressing the disparities and implementing targeted interventions, schools can work towards creating a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students.

Table 4.24 Religion-based Experiences of Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination in the School Environment

Religion	Witnessed or experienced bullying, harassment, or discriminatory action in school		Total
	No	Yes	
Hindu	85.5%	14.5%	100.0%
Islam	73.1%	26.9%	100.0%
Others	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Total	84.0%	16.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Conclusion

Ensuring educational equity is crucial to creating inclusive societies and providing equitable opportunities for individuals regardless of their backgrounds and circumstances. This study examined educational equity in rural public schools in Nepal's Rautahat District. The study aimed to offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing equity in education by employing a multi-level analysis, including macro, meso, and micro perspectives. The study identified existing macro-level policies, plans, programs, and strategies that promote educational equity.

Additionally, this study has examined the implementation and effectiveness of such plans and programs at the school level, providing insights into the availability of resources. At the microlevel, the study assessed the student's satisfaction with equity plans and programs and whether such policies have been able to cater to the needs of diverse people. Furthermore, it has explored students' perspectives on inclusivity and experiences in accessing equitable and quality education.

The new educational plan for Nepal is commendably comprehensive, with equity serving as a cross-cutting theme. The primary objective of the plan is to ensure that every child, irrespective of their background, has the opportunity to access a high-quality education spanning from primary level to secondary level. The plan prioritizes improving educational access and outcomes for marginalized groups, such as those from remote areas, disadvantaged backgrounds, and people with disabilities. The plan seeks accessible education, strengthens schools for quality and inclusivity, and aims for a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination. Strategies include fair school distribution, enrolling out-of-school children, enhancing scholarships, providing mid-day meals, promoting safe schools, improving literacy and inclusivity in early grades, creating a discrimination-free environment, upgrading facilities, fostering life skills, assessing performance, and ensuring qualified teachers.

Despite the well-intentioned objectives and strategies embedded within the plan, it is important to note that its implementation is still in progress. The risk of all these plans, programs, and strategies remaining confined to documents and not going into tangible action is a major concern. For the plan to be truly transformative, it needs to move beyond words on paper and manifest as concrete actions that uplift the educational experiences of all children in Nepal. Additionally, within the plan, there is an instance where policymakers have mistakenly used equality in place of equity. It is of the utmost importance to use correct terminology to ensure that the intended meaning is accurately conveyed.

Furthermore, if the plans and provisions are executed effectively, they also have the potential to make a substantial difference in students' lives. Notably, policies and programs like free education and mid-day meals exemplify how policies can positively influence students overall

educational welfare and their learning experience. The research findings reflect the positive perception and availability of compulsory and free education and mid-day meal availability among respondents.

Moreover, an analysis of availability and satisfaction across people from different backgrounds, including religions, genders, and ethnicities, reveals no significant disparities, indicating the effective advancement of educational equity through these plans, policies, and programs. These instances demonstrate how such programs can play a role in bridging the gaps that often lead to disparities in educational equity. Also, programs such as multilingual education programs highlight the significance of understanding and evaluating perspectives from the grassroots level (student level). This approach helps ascertain whether policies implemented at higher levels have truly been effective in addressing students' needs. It emphasizes the practical implementation of programs and the importance of considering individual perspectives to prevent programs from being futile.

In essence, gaining insights from those directly impacted by policies is crucial for evaluating the impact of policies, especially for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. It is equally vital to ensure that these provisions and programs cater to the varied requirements of students from different backgrounds, encompassing factors such as ethnicity, gender, and religious affiliation.

The availability of equity plans and programs is consistent across diverse backgrounds, and significant respondents' express satisfaction with available resources. However, an identified drawback pertains to infrastructure, particularly the absence of disability-friendly infrastructure and separate toilets for males and females. These issues have the potential to impact the overall inclusivity and equity of the school environment. Having disability-friendly infrastructure is crucial not only for ensuring that students with disabilities can access the school's facilities but also for promoting a sense of belonging and respect for all students, regardless of their abilities.

Likewise, the provision of separate toilets for male and female students is essential for ensuring privacy, dignity, and a comfortable environment. This aspect is particularly important for addressing gender-specific needs and ensuring that all students feel respected and are accommodated for their basic needs. Addressing these issues is indeed crucial for fostering a more inclusive and equitable school environment. By rectifying the lack of disability-friendly infrastructure and providing separate toilets for male and female students, the school can take significant steps toward creating an environment where every student feels valued, respected, and able to fully participate in their educational experience.

Respect is also an integral component of an inclusive and equitable environment within the school, crucial for students regardless of age, gender, religion, or ethnic background. It is affirmed that most of the students from diverse backgrounds share a sense of mutual respect, and both peers and teachers treat them with respect, yet instances of bullying and discrimination, particularly among Muslim students and those classified under the "Others" category, are more prevalent when compared to other religious and ethnic groups, which is concerning. These experiences highlight the need for targeted interventions to address these concerns and establish a consistently respectful and equitable school environment. This emphasizes the importance of promoting positive behaviors and ensuring that all students feel valued, respected, and supported throughout their educational journey.

The study highlighted the importance of developing an interconnected framework of equity dimensions, considering rules and regulations, participation, and resource flow, to holistically measure and address educational disparities. This research contributes to the development of

evidence-based strategies and interventions that foster equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for all students.

By acknowledging the complexities of equity issues prevalent in rural public schools, this research strives to bring about positive change and establish a more inclusive, just, and equitable educational milieu. The findings and recommendations serve as vital resources for policymakers, educators, researchers, and stakeholders, facilitating the formulation of targeted interventions and policies to promote educational equity in rural settings.

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ANNEX

Survey Questionnaire

S.No	Basic information of respondents
1	Name of the rural municipality
2	Ward No
3	Name of the school
4	Name of the respondent
5	Age
6	Sex
7	Grade
8	Ethnicity
9	Religion
10	Primary language spoken in household
11	Disability status
12	Monthly income of parents

Resources

Rate on a scale of 1 to 3 the availability and satisfaction of the following resources:

Availability = Highly Available (1), Available + (2), Highly Unavailable (3)

Satisfaction = Highly Satisfied (1), Satisfied (2), Highly Unsatisfied (3)

Importance = Extremely important (1), Important (2), Not at all Important (3)

No	Resources	Availability	Satisfaction	Importance
1	Separate toilets for girls and boys			
2	Provision of mid-day meal			
12	Disabled friendly infrastructure			
18	Compulsory and free education (policy)			

Language

1. In what language is the curriculum being taught?

- Bajika
- Nepali
- Bhojpuri
- Maithili
- English
- Others

2. Which language do you prefer to be taught?

- Bajika
- Nepali
- Urdu

- Bhojpuri
- Maithili
- English
- Others

RESPECT

1. Do you feel that your opinions are valued and respected by teachers?
 - Yes
 - No
2. Do you feel all students irrespective of their caste, gender, race, or ethnicity are respected equally?
 - Yes
 - No
3. When you greet your teacher do they greet you back?
 - All the time
 - Some of the time
 - Never
4. On a scale of 1 to 5 how respected do you feel by your friends in school?
5. Are your achievements such as coming first in exams, and winning any competition at school recognized?
 - Yes
 - No
6. Have you ever witnessed or experienced bullying, harassment or discriminatory action in school?
 - Yes
 - No

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