

Socio-Cultural Diversity of Students in College Classrooms in Nepal: Examining Pedagogical Opportunities and Structural Challenges

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Abstract

Today's classrooms in Nepal's schools and colleges comprise students from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The education system is gradually moving away from a traditional, exclusionary approach toward a more inclusive and diversity-oriented model of teaching and learning. As a result, students from different castes, ethnic groups, language communities, and regions come together in the same classroom, creating opportunities for mutual learning, interaction, and collaboration. This article examines the opportunities and challenges associated with socio-cultural diversity in school and college classrooms in Nepal. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach and is based on a comprehensive desk review of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, and constitutional provisions related to education and inclusion in Nepal. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret recurring themes within the selected literature. The study also highlights the gap between inclusive constitutional policies, particularly Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), and everyday classroom practices. Ultimately, the review argues that student diversity should not be viewed as a logistical challenge but as a transformative educational resource. Realizing this potential requires culturally responsive pedagogy, flexible curricula, and a stronger institutional commitment to inclusion.

Keywords: sociocultural diversity, multicultural education, Nepali classroom, educational inequality, inclusive education

Introduction

Nepal is a socio-culturally diverse country in South Asia. According to the National Population and Housing Census (2021), the country comprises 142 caste and ethnic groups, and 124 mother-tongue languages. This diversity is reflected in school and college classrooms, where students from different linguistic, ethnic, religious, caste, and socioeconomic backgrounds share the same educational environment. Contemporary schools in Nepal increasingly represent miniature versions of a broader

pluralistic society (Sherpa, 2019; Mahat, 2019). This demographic complexity makes educational institutions important sites for examining the relationship between diversity, inclusion, and social integration.

Historically, however, Nepal's education system operated through centralized and monocultural policies. During the Panchayat era, the state emphasized the principle of "one nation, one language, one culture," privileging the Nepali language and hill high-caste cultural norms as the foundation of national identity (Tamang, 2022). Such policies marginalized Indigenous languages, minority cultures, and local knowledge systems. As a result, educational institutions functioned not only as sites of learning but also as mechanisms of cultural assimilation and social reproduction (Regmi, 2017). According to Mahat (2019), this monocultural orientation contributed to the exclusion of historically marginalized communities from equitable educational participation. This demonstrates how education can operate as an instrument of state power in reproducing dominant cultural ideologies and structural inequalities.

Political transformations following the restoration of democracy in 1990 and the establishment of a federal democratic republic after 2006 significantly altered educational discourse in Nepal. Inclusive education, multiculturalism, linguistic rights, and social justice became central policy concerns (Regmi, 2017). Article 32 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) grants communities the right to preserve their language and culture, alongside the right to receive basic education in their mother tongue. Consequently, educational policies have increasingly acknowledged the importance of

diversity within classroom settings, particularly through initiatives such as Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) (Koirala, 2021). These policy transformations reflect a broader shift from an assimilationist nation-building to a more inclusive, rights-based educational framework.

Despite these progressive policy developments, managing socio-cultural diversity remains a major challenge in Nepali education. Diverse classrooms create opportunities for collaborative learning, intercultural understanding, and cognitive enrichment (Banks, 2015). At the same time, deeply embedded social hierarchies, caste discrimination, linguistic inequality, and resource disparities continue to shape educational experiences unevenly (Grutter et al., 2022). Teachers frequently lack training in culturally responsive pedagogy, and schools often remain constrained by rigid curricula and examination-oriented teaching practices (Koirala, 2021; Regmi, 2017). This contradiction between inclusive policy rhetoric and unequal educational practice highlights the persistent gap between institutional reform and lived classroom realities.

This study critically examines the opportunities and challenges associated with socio-cultural diversity in Nepali classrooms. Drawing upon peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and constitutional provisions, the study explores theoretical perspectives on multicultural education, reviews existing literature on diversity in Nepali classrooms, and analyzes how diversity shapes classroom interactions, educational outcomes, and institutional practices.

Multicultural Education in Nepal

The concept of multicultural education in Nepal emerged primarily in response to critiques

of historically exclusionary state structures and educational policies. Early educational systems in Nepal prioritized national integration through linguistic and cultural uniformity, often overlooking ethnic and cultural plurality (Regmi, 2017; Tamang, 2022). As Mahat (2019) argues, this monocultural orientation marginalized minority communities and reinforced social inequalities within schools. This historical context illustrates how educational systems can reproduce dominant power relations by normalizing a single cultural identity.

Research on multicultural education in Nepal highlights the growing recognition of diversity as an educational asset rather than a social problem. Tamang (2022) explains that multicultural education seeks to create equitable learning opportunities for students from diverse cultural backgrounds through reforms in curricula, pedagogy, and school culture. Similarly, Sherpa (2019) argues that multicultural education encourages inclusivity, mutual respect, and democratic participation in classrooms. Banks (2015) further emphasizes that multicultural education is not limited to cultural representation alone but requires structural transformation within educational institutions to ensure genuine educational equity. This suggests that multicultural education involves not only cultural recognition but also the redistribution of educational opportunities and institutional power.

Mahat (2019) critically observes that multicultural practices in Nepali schools often remain superficial. According to the study, schools may incorporate festivals, cultural symbols, or ethnic names into textbooks while leaving deeper institutional inequalities unaddressed. Such symbolic inclusion fails to tackle structural issues such as discriminatory pedagogies,

unequal participation, and hierarchical school cultures. Consequently, scholars emphasize that multicultural education must extend beyond cultural representation to institutional transformation. This critique highlights the limitations of tokenistic multiculturalism, which celebrates diversity symbolically while preserving structural inequalities in practice.

The existing literature further demonstrates that socio-cultural diversity can positively influence student interaction, classroom participation, and collaborative learning. Studies conducted in diverse school settings suggest that students exposed to multicultural environments tend to develop greater tolerance, empathy, and intercultural communication skills (Sherpa, 2019; Koirala, 2021). Nevertheless, researchers emphasize that the positive outcomes of diversity depend heavily on teacher attitudes, institutional support, and the effective implementation of inclusive classroom practices (Koirala, 2021; Regmi, 2017). This indicates that diversity alone does not automatically produce inclusion unless it is supported by effective pedagogical approaches and institutional practices.

Linguistic Diversity and Multilingual Education

Linguistic diversity is a central dimension of Nepali classrooms. Nepal's multilingual reality has generated significant academic discussion surrounding language policy, mother-tongue education, and English-medium instruction (Ruiz, 1984; Sherpa, 2019). Research consistently demonstrates that children learn more effectively when their early education is conducted in their first language (Cummins, 2000). Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) was therefore introduced to improve educational access and reduce dropout rates among marginalized linguistic

communities. Supporters of MTB-MLE argue that recognizing students' home languages strengthens conceptual understanding, cognitive development, and cultural identity (Cummins, 2000). This suggests that multilingual education can serve as an important mechanism for promoting educational achievement and cultural recognition among marginalized groups.

However, the challenges of implementation remain substantial. Scholars have noted that many schools lack the multilingual teaching materials, trained teachers, and institutional support required for effective multilingual education (Regmi, 2017). Public demand for English-medium instruction has further complicated policy implementation. English is frequently associated with modernization, upward mobility, and educational quality, leading many parents and schools to prioritize English over local languages (Koirala, 2021). This contradiction reflects the tension between inclusive language policies and the socio-economic dominance of English in contemporary educational aspirations.

Studies on translanguaging and multilingual pedagogy suggest that students naturally draw upon multiple linguistic resources during the learning process. Rather than treating local languages as obstacles, researchers advocate viewing them as cognitive resources that support learning and classroom participation (Banks, 2015; Sherpa, 2019). Nevertheless, many teachers continue to perceive multilingualism as a challenge rather than a pedagogical opportunity (Koirala, 2021). This highlights that successful multilingual education depends not only on policy reform but also on transforming teachers' pedagogical attitudes and classroom practices.

Socioeconomic and Caste-Based Inequality

Another major theme in the existing literature concerns the relationship between

education, caste, and socioeconomic inequality (Regmi, 2017; Tamang, 2022). Although Nepal legally abolished caste discrimination in 1963, scholars argue that caste-based exclusion continues to shape educational experiences in subtle but persistent ways (Sherpa, 2019). Regmi (2017) emphasizes that students from marginalized communities often experience unequal access to educational opportunities, while Grutter et al. (2022) demonstrate how socioeconomic biases influence peer inclusion and participation within schools. Their findings suggest that inequality operates not only structurally but also through everyday classroom interactions.

Expanding this discussion, Mahat (2019) argues that inclusive education policies frequently fail to address deeper social and geographic inequalities, particularly in rural and remote regions, where access to qualified teachers and educational infrastructure remains limited. This indicates that educational inequality in Nepal is reproduced through both formal institutional arrangements and informal social relations, making it deeply embedded and difficult to eliminate through policy measures alone.

Research Gap

Although considerable scholarship exists on multicultural education, multilingualism, and educational inequality in Nepal, important gaps remain. Many studies have examined linguistic diversity, caste inequality, and multicultural education as separate issues rather than analyzing their interconnected effects on classroom experiences and educational outcomes (Regmi, 2017; Sherpa, 2019). Consequently, the complex and multidimensional nature of socio-cultural diversity in Nepali school and college classrooms remains insufficiently explored. This fragmentation in existing research limits

a holistic understanding of how multiple dimensions of diversity interact within everyday educational settings.

Similarly, while inclusive and multicultural education has been widely emphasized, limited research has focused on the practical implementation of inclusive pedagogies in classroom settings (Koirala, 2021). In particular, inadequate attention has been given to how teachers manage cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity in everyday teaching practices. Furthermore, much of the literature prioritizes policy frameworks over examining the gaps between policy commitments and classroom realities (Mahat, 2019; Regmi, 2017). Therefore, this review synthesizes these dimensions to provide a more integrated understanding of inclusive education in Nepali classrooms. This highlights the need for empirical, classroom-based research that bridges the persistent gap between policy discourse and pedagogical practice in Nepali education.

Methodology

This article is based on a narrative review and thematic analysis of secondary sources related to socio-cultural diversity and inclusive education in Nepal. The study draws upon academic books, ten peer-reviewed journal articles, and constitutional provisions concerning multicultural education, multilingualism, caste inequality, and classroom diversity in Nepal. Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret recurring themes within the selected literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analytically, this approach allows for a synthesized understanding of existing knowledge rather than relying on isolated empirical findings.

Relevant literature was selected based on its relevance to multicultural education,

linguistic diversity, socioeconomic inequality, and inclusive educational practices in Nepal. Particular attention was given to studies examining classroom experiences, educational policies, and structural barriers affecting marginalized communities. The study also incorporates theoretical perspectives from multicultural education and multilingual learning to provide conceptual grounding. This selective and theory-informed approach ensured that the review remained focused on the key structural and pedagogical dimensions of educational diversity.

The collected literature was analyzed thematically to examine the opportunities and challenges associated with socio-cultural diversity in Nepali classrooms. The major themes identified were enhancement of critical thinking, intercultural understanding, democratic socialization, caste inequality, linguistic marginalization, inadequate teacher preparation, curriculum rigidity, and resource constraints. This thematic mapping highlights the interconnected nature of the opportunities and challenges within Nepal's diverse classroom contexts.

This review-based study did not involve primary field research or statistical analysis. Instead, it synthesizes existing literature to provide an integrated understanding of how socio-cultural diversity shapes classroom interactions, educational experiences, and institutional practices in Nepal. This methodological choice enhances conceptual clarity by prioritizing theoretical integration over empirical generalizations.

Theoretical Orientation

This study is grounded in the theories of multicultural education and multilingual

learning. James A. Banks' framework of multicultural education provides the primary conceptual basis for analyzing diversity within educational institutions. Banks (2015) identified five dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture. These dimensions emphasize that meaningful inclusion requires structural and pedagogical transformation rather than the symbolic recognition of diversity. In the Nepali context, this framework helps assess how schools accommodate socio-cultural diversity through classroom practices and institutional structures. Methodologically, Banks' framework enables a systematic evaluation of whether Nepali educational practices move beyond tokenism toward genuine institutional equity.

The article also draws on Richard Ruiz's (1984) language-as-resource orientation, which views multilingualism as an educational asset that supports cognitive and academic development. Similarly, the concept of translanguaging explains how multilingual learners draw on integrated linguistic repertoires during classroom interactions. This perspective aligns with Cummins' (2000) interdependence hypothesis, which argues that strong first-language proficiency facilitates second-language acquisition. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding how institutional practices and pedagogical approaches shape inclusive educational experiences in diverse classrooms. Collectively, these perspectives shift the understanding of multilingualism from a problem-oriented approach to a resource-based pedagogical framework that supports inclusive learning.

Results and Discussion

Educational Context and Policy Landscape in Nepal

Nepal's educational system has gradually shifted from a historically centralized and monocultural model to a more inclusive and diversity-oriented framework. Earlier state policies emphasized linguistic and cultural uniformity by privileging the Nepali language and dominant hill high-caste cultural norms within formal education (Tamang, 2022). Such policies marginalized Indigenous languages, minority identities, and local knowledge systems, contributing to unequal educational participation (Regmi, 2017). This historical trajectory indicates that education has functioned not only as a learning space but also as a mechanism of cultural standardization and social stratification.

Political changes after 1990 and the establishment of a federal democratic republic have significantly transformed educational discourse in Nepal. Inclusive education, multiculturalism, and linguistic rights have increasingly become central policy concerns. The restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990 created greater space for marginalized ethnic, linguistic, Dalit, Madhesi, and Indigenous groups to demand equitable access to education and cultural recognition. Similarly, the People's Movement of 2006 and subsequent political restructuring accelerated debates on social inclusion, proportional representation, and educational equity within state policies and institutions. Article 32 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) recognizes the right to education in the mother tongue and acknowledges Nepal as a multilingual and multicultural society. Consequently, policies such as MTB-MLE have been introduced to improve educational access

and participation among marginalized linguistic communities (Koirala, 2021). This policy shift reflects the institutional recognition of diversity as a fundamental principle of democratic education rather than a peripheral concern.

Despite these progressive policy commitments, implementation challenges still remain. Many schools continue to lack multilingual teaching materials, culturally responsive curricula, and adequately trained teachers who can effectively manage diverse classrooms (Regmi, 2017). Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) has created additional tensions within Nepali education. Although English is widely associated with educational quality, employment opportunities, and upward social mobility, its growing dominance often marginalizes local languages and reproduces educational inequality (Koirala, 2021). Consequently, Nepal's educational landscape reflects the continuing tension between constitutional commitments to inclusion and persistent structural inequalities in educational practice. This gap between policy intentions and classroom realities highlights the enduring influence of structural constraints on progressive educational reforms.

Opportunities of Socio-Cultural Diversity

Enhancement of Critical Thinking

Socio-cultural diversity contributes significantly to intellectual and cognitive development within classrooms. Students from different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds bring varied experiences and perspectives to academic discussions. Exposure to multiple viewpoints encourages critical reflection, analytical reasoning, and open-mindedness (Banks, 2015; Cummins, 2000).

By framing diversity as a cognitive asset rather than a pedagogical challenge, this foundational literature suggests that exposure to diverse perspectives enhances students' intellectual development, encourages them to question assumptions, and promotes higher-order critical thinking.

Research conducted in diverse Nepali classrooms indicates that students perceive diversity as enhancing classroom discussion and collaborative learning. Diverse interactions challenge stereotypes and expose learners to alternative interpretations of social reality. Such experiences help students develop broader worldviews and democratic attitudes (Koirala, 2021; Sherpa, 2019). This evidence suggests that classroom diversity can contribute to reducing social prejudice and strengthening civic-minded perspectives within the Nepali context.

Social Integration and Cross-Cultural Understanding

Diverse classrooms also function as important spaces for social integration and intercultural understanding. Daily interactions among students from different caste, ethnic, and religious backgrounds create opportunities to reduce prejudice and foster empathy (Banks, 2015; Sherpa, 2019). Consequently, these everyday interactions transform the classroom into a space where students learn to appreciate diversity and build meaningful social relationships across cultural boundaries.

Collaborative activities, group discussions, and cooperative learning environments encourage students to build relationships across social divisions. These interactions contribute to social cohesion and democratic citizenship (Tamang, 2022; Mahat, 2019). In societies historically shaped by exclusionary hierarchies,

schools possess significant transformative potential as spaces for inclusive socialization.

Enrichment of Teaching and Learning

Socio-cultural diversity can enrich pedagogical practices by encouraging teachers to adopt more inclusive and student-centered approaches. Integrating local experiences, cultural knowledge, and multilingual resources makes classroom learning more meaningful and relevant for students (Banks, 2015; Koirala, 2021). This highlights how cultural diversity can serve as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation, encouraging teachers to move beyond standardized curricula and adopt culturally responsive teaching practices that recognize students' diverse backgrounds.

Inclusive classrooms also promote creativity and flexibility in teaching. Teachers working with diverse learners are often encouraged to move beyond rigid lecture-based instruction toward more interactive and participatory learning approaches (Grutter et al., 2022; Regmi, 2017). Such pedagogical shifts benefit both minority and majority students alike. Ultimately, the presence of diverse learners encourages more dynamic, democratic, and engaging learning environments that enhance the educational experience of all students.

Democratic Socialization

Schools play an important role in preparing students for participation in pluralistic democratic societies. Diverse classrooms expose learners to cooperation, negotiation, and respectful dialogue across social differences. Students learn to navigate diversity constructively, which is essential for democratic citizenship in multicultural societies such as Nepal (Banks, 2015; Tamang, 2022). By transforming the classroom into a micro-

arena for civic engagement, this cooperative environment teaches students to bridge cultural divides, demonstrating that ethnic and social diversity can contribute to the development of a stable democratic national identity.

Multicultural educational environments also encourage values such as tolerance, inclusivity, equality, and mutual respect. Through collaborative learning and intercultural interaction, students develop the civic competencies and social responsibility necessary for participation in a democratic society (Sherpa, 2019; Regmi, 2017). In the Nepali context, where society is characterized by ethnic, linguistic, caste, and regional diversity, schools can function as important spaces for promoting social harmony and inclusive citizenship (Mahat, 2019; Koirala, 2021). This demonstrates that multicultural classrooms can play a significant role in nation-building by transforming cultural differences into opportunities for social cohesion and shared civic engagement.

Challenges and Systemic Barriers

Caste and Socioeconomic Inequality

Despite legal reforms and inclusive policies, caste-based discrimination and socioeconomic inequalities continue to shape classroom experiences. Students from marginalized communities frequently encounter exclusion, lower expectations, and unequal opportunities for participation (Regmi, 2017; Tamang, 2022). Economic disparities further affect access to educational resources, private tutoring, digital technology, and quality schooling. Students from economically privileged backgrounds often possess advantages that influence their academic performance and social inclusion within classrooms (Sherpa, 2019; Mahat, 2019). This highlights a critical disconnect between

policy commitments and classroom realities, demonstrating that institutional reforms alone cannot guarantee equity when deeply entrenched social hierarchies and economic inequalities continue to influence educational outcomes.

Linguistic Marginalization

Although multilingualism is constitutionally recognized, linguistic inequality persists in schools. Nepali and English continue to dominate educational institutions, often marginalizing Indigenous languages and local dialects (Cummins, 2000; Ruiz, 1984). Students who lack proficiency in the dominant instructional languages may experience reduced classroom participation and lower levels of confidence. Teachers frequently lack training in multilingual pedagogy and may perceive local languages as obstacles rather than educational resources (Koirala, 2021; Regmi, 2017). Such linguistic hierarchies can negatively affect students' educational achievement, identity formation, and sense of belonging in the classroom (Sherpa, 2019; Tamang, 2022). This reveals how the dominance of particular languages can create invisible barriers to participation and achievement, particularly for students from linguistically marginalized communities.

Insufficient Teacher Preparation

One of the major barriers to inclusive education is inadequate teacher training. Many educators receive limited preparation in culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive classroom management, and multilingual instruction (Koirala, 2021; Regmi, 2017). Consequently, teachers may struggle to address the diverse learning needs of their students effectively. Without adequate institutional support, educators often rely on traditional teaching methods that privilege dominant cultural norms (Banks, 2015; Sherpa, 2019). The

lack of professional development opportunities related to multicultural and inclusive education further limits teachers' ability to create equitable and participatory learning environments. This emphasizes that progressive educational policies cannot be effectively implemented unless teachers are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and institutional support.

Curricular Rigidity and Examination Pressure

Nepal's centralized curriculum and examination system significantly constrain inclusive pedagogical practices. Teachers face pressure to complete prescribed syllabi and prepare students for standardized examinations. This often discourages contextualized teaching and localized curriculum adaptation (Koirala, 2021; Banks, 2015). Consequently, classroom diversity may be overlooked rather than integrated into teaching practices. Students' local experiences, cultural knowledge, and linguistic resources often remain underutilized within formal education (Sherpa, 2019; Tamang, 2022). According to Regmi (2017), such rigid educational structures can limit the practical implementation of multicultural and inclusive education in Nepali schools. This illustrates how highly standardized educational systems can create tensions between policy goals and classroom realities, making it difficult for teachers to respond effectively to student diversity.

Resource Constraints

Many public schools in Nepal operate under severe infrastructural and financial limitations. Schools frequently lack multicultural learning materials, multilingual textbooks, trained personnel, and inclusive educational resources. Rural and remote schools face particularly acute shortages (Regmi, 2017; Sherpa, 2019). Without

adequate institutional investment, the effective implementation of inclusive education policies remains challenging. Limited educational funding and the unequal distribution of resources continue to hinder the development of equitable learning environments across diverse regions of Nepal (Thakuri & Neupane, 2020; Tamang, 2022). This highlights the fact that inclusive educational policies require substantial material and institutional support if they are to be translated into meaningful educational practice.

Conclusion

Socio-cultural diversity represents both a significant opportunity and a complex challenge within Nepali classrooms. Diversity enriches educational environments by fostering critical thinking, intercultural understanding, collaborative learning, and democratic socialization. Inclusive classrooms have the potential to transform schools into spaces that promote equity, empathy, and social cohesion. However, these opportunities are constrained by persistent structural inequalities. Caste discrimination, socioeconomic disparities, linguistic marginalization, inadequate teacher preparation, curricular rigidity, and resource scarcity continue to undermine inclusive educational practices. The gap between constitutional commitments and classroom realities remains substantial.

Systemic reforms are essential if Nepal is to fully realize the educational benefits of diversity. Teacher education programs must prioritize culturally responsive pedagogies and multilingual teaching strategies. Curricula should become more flexible and context-sensitive, allowing schools to integrate local knowledge and cultural experiences into classroom learning. Educational institutions must move beyond symbolic

multiculturalism toward genuine structural inclusion. Ultimately, recognizing socio-cultural diversity as an educational resource rather than a classroom obstacle is essential for building a more democratic, equitable, and inclusive education system in Nepal.

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