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The Karmic cycle of reform: Teacher-student interactions shaping persistent practices and pedagogical possibilities in Nepal's basic schools

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Abstract

Nepal's school education system has seen repeated reform efforts over the past two decades, which are aiming to improve quality and equity and promote Learner-Centred Education (LCE). Yet the everyday interactions that shape teaching and learning in classrooms remain underexamined, while the classroom practices have persisted with little change over time. This persistence reflects a 'black box' in which policy ambitions circulate without attending to what teachers and children actually do, value, and experience in daily classroom life. This thesis explores how policy–practice gaps endure over time. It uses the locally grounded metaphor of a karmic cycle to characterise reforms that continually return in incomplete ways.

To understand how pedagogical practices are enacted, experienced, and negotiated, the study positions teachers and children as central actors in shaping classroom life. Particular emphasis is placed on children's experiences, which remain underrepresented in LCE research and Nepali policy discourse. Drawing on the theory of the pedagogical nexus and an onto-cultural perspective, the study examines how pedagogy emerges through interactions among structural pressures, cultural values, and everyday relationships.

Within this nested context, culturally embedded teaching styles surfaced, forming a Nepali interpretive frame: *guru* (authority, discipline, responsibility) and *abhibhawak* (care, guidance, relational support). Teachers blended these styles along a spectrum rather than treating them as fixed categories, helping explain why authority-driven practices persist while relational orientations simultaneously create subtle openings.

The study uses a Comparative Case Study design across three community schools in Kathmandu, Kapilvastu, and Baglung, informed by an ethnographic orientation. I was embedded across the three school contexts in daily interactions, six days a week for 27 weeks. Data were generated through multiple methods: semi-structured teacher interviews, creative participatory activities with children, informal conversations, fieldnotes, and classroom observations. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Across the schools, a palette of pedagogical practices emerged, dominated by content-driven and exam-centred teaching. These practices were shaped not by LCE reform mandates but by teachers' and students' expectations, beliefs, and everyday cultural logics. Children negotiated classroom practices through compliance, silence, resistance, and peer-led support.

By centring children's voices and situating pedagogy within its cultural and structural contexts, the thesis explains why LCE reforms tend to cycle back repeatedly. It argues that meaningful transformation may not come from imported models. Instead, it may lie in strengthening the relational possibilities already present within classrooms.

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Author’s Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signed: Pritha Dahal

7 September 2026

Glossary

Nepal word/phrase	Closest translation
Abhibhawak	Parent
Afno manche	Our own person; usually refers to relatives, close friends, or inner circles
Aula rakhera padha	Read by placing your finger (on the words).
Bahini	Younger sister
Bansha	Lineage
Bahun	Nepali term for the Brahmin caste (traditionally priests/scholars)
Bhakti	Devotion; religious worship or love directed toward a deity, surrender
Bhasa	Language
Bikas	Development, progress
Chettri	Nepali term for the Kshatriya caste (traditionally warriors/rulers)
Dharma	Morales, righteousness; duty, ethics, or the natural law of the universe
Guru	Teacher, spiritual guide or mentor
Gurudakshina	A traditional Nepali student offering to their teacher signifies deep respect and gratitude, often given during ceremonies like Guru Purnima or after completing a course.
Gurukul	A traditional residential school where students live with their guru
Hami Asal Bacha Haun, Man Lagayum Bhane Chandrama Chuna Sakchaum	We are good children; if we set our minds to it, we can reach the moon.
Himal	The high mountain/Himalayan region
Himali	People from the high mountain/Himalayan region
Janajati	Indigenous
Jong	The Vertical Anchor (Spirit & Defense)

Nepal word/phrase	Closest translation
Karma	Consequence of action/ fate/ intentional choice, agency / duty (it depends on how it is used in context)
Karnadhar	Productive labour force
Kirat/kirati	An indigenous ethnic group of the Himalayan region
Kriya	Action, deed, or a specific yogic practice
Man Manai Padha	"Read silently" or "Read in your mind"
Matwali	Traditionally, groups that consume liquor (liquor-drinkers) as part of their culture
Moksha	Liberation; release from the cycle of rebirth (Hinduism)
Muluki Ain	National Code: Nepal's first unified legal system promulgated in 1854 to unify the civil, criminal and religious laws.
Newari	Local language spoken in Kathmandu valley; an indigenous population in Kathmandu valley
Nirvana	Enlightenment; the state of being free from suffering (Buddhism)
Padhera Haina	You don't learn by (just) reading; you learn by
Parera Sikincha	experiencing/doing.
Pahad	The middle mountain/hill region of Nepal
Pahadi	People from the middle mountain/hill region of Nepal
Panga	The Horizontal Connection (Land & Lineage)
Phala	Fruit; often used to mean the "result" or "consequence" of an action
Prarabdha	The present state, what is happening right now/manifestataion
Pyatta Hannu	To hit gently
Rahat Darbandi	Relief quota (teacher contract)
Rahat Shikshyak	Temporary teacher
Sanchita Karma	The sum total of all past karmas yet to be resolved
Sanskar/samskar	Cultural rites, values, or mental impressions

Nepal word/phrase	Closest translation
Saraddah	A Nepali cultural tradition of observing the annual death anniversary of a parent or ancestor.
Serophero	The core Integrated Curriculum subject for Grades 1–3 in Nepal. It combines Social Studies, Science, Health, and Creative Arts into a single.
Shiksha Ain	Education Act (Law)
Sikhshya Niyamwali	Education regulation
Shishya	Student; disciple or pupil
Tagadhari	Wearers of the "holy thread" (Janai); usually referring to upper-caste Hindus
Tarai	The low-lying plains region of southern Nepal

Abbreviations

ANT	Actor Network Theory
AWS	Activity with Student
CAS	Continuous Assessment System
CCS	Comparative Case Study
CDC	Curriculum Development Centre
CEHRD	Centre for Education and Human Resource Development
CIE	Comparative and Internation Education
CoP	Communities of Practice
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CWS	Conversations with Student
ECED	Early Childhood Education and Development
EFA	Education for All
EMIS	Education Management Information System
FN	Field Notes
GER	Gross Enrollment Rate
GoN	Government of Nepal
IEMIS	Integrated Education Management Information System
IO	International organisations
JFP	Joint Financing Partners
LCE	Learner-Centred Education
LIC	Low Income Countries
MDG	Millenium Development Goals
MKO	Most Knowledgeable Other
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MS	Minimum Standards
NASA	National Assessment of Student Achievement
PCF	Per Child funding
PLS	Plain Language Statement
TA	Thematic Analysis
RQ	Research Questions
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SESP	School Education Sector Plan

SESP	School Education Sector Plan
SMC	School Management Centre
SSDP	School Education Development Plan
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
SSRP	School Sector Reform Plan
SSRP	School Sector Reform Plan
SWAp	Sector Wide Approach
TA	Thematic Analysis
TCE	Teacher-Centred Education
TPD	Teacher Professional Development
TPSS	Teacher Professional Support System
TSC	Teacher Service Commission
UNCRC	United Nations Child Rights Convention
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1. Introduction: Setting the stage

Nepal's school education system has long been in constant motion: for decades, the goal has been to transform teaching, learning, and classrooms. Despite this, everyday practices and quality issues remain largely unchanged. This broader tension became real to me in a moment that changed how I understood school education in Nepal.

> *In 2012, I returned to Nepal after completing my undergraduate degree, convinced that I could transform the education system. How hard could it be? I imagined myself working in policy, perhaps in the glamorous world of international organisations. One thing I was sure about. I did not want to be a teacher. Teaching felt 'mundane' and 'uninspiring'. I was convinced that I couldn't change the system by 'just teaching'.*
>
> *During a field visit with an NGO that trained community schoolteachers to make their pedagogical approaches more experiential and learner-centred, I met a teacher who had built a slide for his students. He told me, "Their smiles make everything better." He then asked what I would recommend to make his students more curious and enjoy learning, a question I had neither the capacity nor the legitimacy to answer. That moment unsettled me. Soon after, I left my job and chose the very path I had dismissed: becoming a teacher. I realised that if I were to work with teachers, I needed to understand what it means to teach, to navigate the everyday realities of the classroom, and to be part of what I had dismissed as uninspiring and unimpactful.*

I begin this chapter with a personal reflection, not because I am the centre of this research but because I am deeply embedded in it. This interaction reflects a broader tension in Nepal's education reform space. Policies often demand transformation, yet we know remarkably little about the lived realities of teaching and learning in everyday classrooms.

Nepal's education reform landscape has been shaped by global goals, donor agendas, and shifting political priorities (Bhatta, 2011; Parajuli et al., 2021; Regmi, 2017, 2021). These efforts have been implemented through close collaboration with donor partners and International Organisations (IOs), including the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, JICA, among many others (MoEST, 2021). This collaboration aims to 'fix' the system (Ham, 2022; Shields and

Rappleye, 2008a). The reforms have closely aligned with global goals, including Education For All (1990-2015) (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) (MDGs), and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030) (SDGs), aiming to strengthen quality and access (Regmi, 2024). The reforms are diverse and far-reaching, ranging from restructuring schools and school governance to strengthening teaching quality and curriculum.

A key focus of these reforms has been on transforming pedagogical practices to improve the quality of education (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022). The transformation involves moving away from traditional teacher-centred, content-focused 'passive' learning towards 'active', learner-centred practices (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022). The implementation of Learner-Centred Education (LCE) is believed to help address deep-rooted quality problems in the education system. The assumption is that it enables students to engage actively in learning, with teachers facilitating the co-construction of knowledge (Schweisfurth, 2013) and the development of skills, competencies and democratic values vital for the 21st century (MoEST, 2022). However, while these policy ambitions have remained central to Nepal's reform agenda, little is known about how such pedagogical visions are negotiated, interpreted, or enacted in everyday classroom practice, at the level where these reforms were meant to take shape.

Nepal has made significant strides in expanding access to education. The literacy rate was below 2% in the 1950s, when public education began (Parajuli et al., 2021), and has risen to 76.2% according to official data (CEHRD, 2024). Basic education enrolment has also expanded, with Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at 118.0% and Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) at 95.1% (ibid.), and the survival rate up to grade 8 reaching 83.5% (ibid.). However, survival from grade 1 to 12 is only 33.1%, with many students leaving school after grade 8 (ibid.). These figures highlight disparities across the education system, including rural-urban divides, ethnic differences, and gender gaps (Shields and Rappleye, 2008b).

These disparities reflect deeper systemic challenges that persist despite reform efforts (Shields and Rappleye, 2008a). This is often attributed to poor quality in the school education system, a failing public education system, and a lack of confidence in it (Pradhan and Valentin, 2021), despite reform efforts to transform pedagogical practices. Scholars including Bhatta (2011), Carney and

Bista (2009), and Regmi (2017) attribute this to fractured reform education policies that have aligned with global goals but failed to consider lived realities. Furthermore, the Nepali education system remains entrenched in structural inequalities and reproduces the hegemony of the dominant caste/ethnic group, the *Bahun-Chettri* (Pradhan, 2020a; Shields and Rappleye, 2008a).

While these critiques focus on structural and policy issues, few research efforts examine classroom dynamics or school-level practices. Most discourses emphasise the disconnect between policy and practice, as well as the role of donor organisations within the Nepali education system. However, fewer studies (Caddell, 2005, 2006, 2007a; Ham and Dekkers, 2019; Karki, 2014; Rothchild, 2007; Wallenius, 2022) explore in-school experiences and how large visions are translated into daily practice, including how these are experienced and negotiated in schools. My research contributes to the limited existing evidence on understanding the everyday experiences of teaching and learning processes in Nepali classrooms.

The aims of strengthening and transforming the education system are ultimately framed in terms of benefiting children (MoEST, 2021). However, their experiences are often overlooked, with very little literature examining what children think or how they experience these reforms. This is particularly relevant as Nepal has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which requires that children's voices not only be heard but meaningfully integrated into policy and practice (Lundy, 2007; UNICEF, 1990; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Despite these commitments, children are frequently treated as an abstract and universalised category (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a). They are faceless and usually represented through metrics of education outcomes and performance (Adamson and Brown, 2024), and their perspectives remain underrepresented in both policy and research. In this study, I argue that children actively shape their learning contexts. By highlighting learners' experiences and voices, this research demonstrates that they are not passive recipients of adults' decisions but active participants in shaping pedagogical practices.

Aims, objectives and research questions

All these points lead back to the narrative of the 'persisting learning crisis' (Akyeampong and Higgins, 2025) that Nepal is facing. Despite numerous interventions, IOs and government authorities repeatedly report that Nepali children in primary school are not meeting basic literacy and numeracy milestones (World Bank, 2024). In essence, they are not learning (Poudel and Bhattarai, 2018). Yet, despite recognising the crisis, we still do not know exactly what happens inside classrooms. It remains a 'black box', widely acknowledged as important yet understudied and often overlooked. The assumption is that if the system's structures and elements are fixed, learning will improve.

However, the fact of the matter is that teaching-learning processes are not detached or simple 'acts of teaching' (Alexander, 2000). Pedagogical practices need to be understood within their specific context, encompassing not just teaching-learning practices but also the discourses that shape and influence it (Alexander, 2000). Therefore, pedagogical practices cannot just be altered without fully understanding what they are and how they are negotiated and experienced.

This study aims to unpack this black box by investigating what is happening. It examines daily teaching and learning practices in Nepal's primary schools, with analysis grounded in the contextual realities that shape them.

Therefore, in the context of successive education reforms and policy discourses promoting learner-centred education, the study has explored the following research question:

- How do teachers and learners engage in and experience teaching-learning processes in Nepali basic schools?

To unpack this in depth, and understand the contextual and cultural realities, it is important to understand what the most prevalent pedagogical practices are and how they take shape, which is why the study is also guided by the following sub-questions:

- What prevalent pedagogical practices and patterns can be observed in Nepali classrooms/schools?

- How are these practices shaped by teachers' and learners' beliefs and experiences?

Thus, to truly understand why these practices exist and how they persist or are negotiated, it is essential to study the beliefs that underpin these pedagogical practices and classroom experiences. This includes recognising that children's experiences of teachers shape how they behave in classrooms and therefore actively influence pedagogical practices.

The study does not examine whether LCE has been implemented or why it may not have ever been. Rather, it examines current practices within a post-LCE reform setting, and how the context, values, and realities of teachers and learners shape pedagogical approaches, incorporating learners' experiences and recognising their active role in shaping these practices.

These practices and beliefs will be analysed using theoretical frameworks that include the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and the onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017), not only examining how teaching acts but also understanding the underlying values, beliefs, and structural influences (Alexander, 2000). This approach enables me to explore pedagogical practices within complex, context-rich settings that extend beyond simple backgrounds as 'containers' (Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024).

Schweisfurth's (2013) framework for LCE, Minimum Standards (MS) will also be used as an organising framework to present the findings. It offers a flexible conceptualisation of LCE that can adapt to local cultural and structural realities rather than imposing rigid, universal definitions across settings (Schweisfurth, 2013). In this study, the MS functions as an organising schema rather than an evaluative tool, supporting the unpacking of the cultural and structural logics that shape pedagogical practice.

These theoretical and conceptual perspectives guide the study's analysis of pedagogical practices. However, it is equally important to consider also the broader structural and cultural contexts in which these practices are experienced, influenced and shaped. Understanding what teachers and students do inside classrooms requires attention to the values, expectations, and worldviews that frame education in Nepal. These cultural logics shape how

learning, success, authority and care are understood and enacted. This, in turn, influences how reforms such as LCE are interpreted in practice. It is therefore necessary to situate the study within the cultural and historical landscape that underpins everyday teaching and learning.

The importance and significance of education in Nepal

Having outlined the research questions and aims, I will now briefly talk about the importance of education in Nepal. A more detailed discussion is presented in *Chapter 2*.

Public education has always symbolised the means for *bikas* (development / progress in Nepali) (Pigg, 1992). In Nepal, it is a means to achieve modernity and prosperity that aligns with Western notions of development (Pigg, 1992).

Bikas has two connotations. First, the development of physical infrastructure, including roads for improved connectivity and the replacement of traditional houses with concrete buildings. This is often used as currency for political campaigns by politicians (Castellsagué and Panthi, 2025). The assumption is that such facilities will ease the burden and make life easier for the public (Castellsagué and Panthi, 2025). The other aspect aligns with global goals of equality, equity and social justice (Castellsagué and Panthi, 2025) and building a country with strong democratic values (MoEST, 2021). This reflects the close collaboration with IOs and donor partners in working towards achieving this to improve the lives of ordinary Nepalis (Castellsagué and Panthi, 2025).

In this cultural landscape, education becomes one of the primary means through which both aspirations of *bikas* are imagined and pursued, encompassing both infrastructural growth, which signifies economic prosperity, and the ideological aim of building a society based on equality, social justice, and democratic values (Wallenius, 2022). The assumption is that education leads to the envisioned linear progress that modern Nepalis strive to embody as symbols of belonging to the broader Western-informed development project. It is intended to move Nepalis from darkness to light (Caddell, 2006). This belief in education has become a faith (Rappleye, 2019), in which education is expected to promote material upliftment and economic mobility (Castellsagué and Panthi, 2025).

Despite this ideal, education has also become a battlefield for various ideologies, where it has played a central role in all major political movements

(Caddell, 2007c; Shields and Rappleye, 2008a). Teachers have been blamed for not strengthening the quality of education, particularly because they are 'political cadres' and 'highly politicised' (Pherali, 2021; Shields and Rappleye, 2008a). In this context, the aim of my thesis is to present the nuances and the contextual realities in which teachers and children navigate the current system.

Having outlined the study's aims and questions, I now introduce the metaphor of the karmic cycle. This cultural metaphor stemming from the Hindu/Buddhist worldview aids in interpreting the recurring patterns of reform and their entanglement with cultural and systemic logics. I use the karmic cycle metaphor not as an abstract idea but to understand why reforms keep looping back without breaking free. It helps me to interpret these patterns through a lens that feels culturally grounded in Nepali worldviews while connecting to the broader argument about recurring policy cycles.

Introducing the karmic cycle metaphor

To interpret Nepal's recurring patterns of educational reform, I utilise the cultural metaphor of the karmic cycle. This perspective views experiences, structures, and systems as cyclical rather than linear, with each reform's vision and implementation influencing the subsequent cycle. The metaphor helps explain why reforms seldom begin from a blank slate and why patterns reappear: every reform cycle acts as the seed for future actions. In this thesis, the karmic cycle provides a conceptual thread for analysis and chapter organisation, reflecting reform stages, the launch, implementation, and manifestation and how these unfold within overlapping cultural and systemic layers. A more detailed discussion of these stages and layers can be found in *Chapter 2*.

This cycle doesn't follow a neat cause-and-effect path. What one reform produces becomes the reality that the next reform inherits. As a result, policies keep looping back, trying to fix old gaps without addressing the deeper cultural and structural issues. To break this loop, we need to look beyond surface-level compliance and pay attention to what really happens in classrooms, the everyday experiences of teachers and learners.

It is with this understanding of reform as cyclical and contextually embedded that the study adopts a Comparative Case Study (CCS) design (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). The flexibility of the design, along with the comparative axes,

creates space to generate data through multiple methods, including class observations, semi-structured interviews, and collaborations with children through arts-based methods. This design was chosen because it enabled a nuanced exploration of how pedagogical practices are shaped across multiple layers of context, therefore aligning with the study's aim to situate and understand pedagogical practices and experiences (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). A more detailed discussion is provided in *Chapter 7*.

Organisation of the thesis

Terminology and usage

To ensure clarity and consistency across the thesis, a number of terms and conventions are used in specific ways.

- Nepali terms

  Nepali words and some sentences appear in *italics* throughout the thesis (e.g., *bikas*, *guru*, *abhibhawak*, *dharma*) followed by the closest translation where appropriate. The list of Nepali terms can also be found in the Glossary. These terms are retained because their meanings do not map neatly onto English equivalents and are important for conveying the cultural logics discussed in this thesis.

- Child/ren, student and learner

  The thesis uses the terms student and learner interchangeably throughout, when engaging with the literature, reflecting on how these terms appear in policy and academic texts. In Chapters *7* (Methodology), *8*-*11* (Findings) and *12* (Discussion), I mostly use 'children' to reflect on how they are much more than just learners or students in the classroom. They are their own people with their beliefs, identities, friendships and experiences. The logic was that it would make them less abstract or universalised (Brown, 2025; Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a).

- Pedagogical practices and teaching–learning

  The terms pedagogical practices and teaching–learning processes are used interchangeably to refer to the everyday interactions, routines and activities that constitute classroom practice, including both observable acts and the values and expectations that shape them (Alexander, 2000).

- Low-Income Countries (LICs)

  I use the term Low-Income Countries (LICs) as a broad shorthand for reform contexts closer to Nepal and the literature drawn on this thesis, while recognising that some examples discussed come from countries classified as lower-middle income countries but which face comparable reform pressures and conditions.

- Note on policy dates and the Bikram Sambat (BS) Calendar

  Nepal uses the Bikram Sambat (BS) calendar for all official purposes, including the naming of laws and education policies, plans and documents:

  - The 57-Year Gap: The BS calendar is approximately 56.7 years ahead of the Gregorian (AD) calendar. For example, the Education Act, 2028 BS was promulgated in 1971 AD.
  - The 'Slashed' Year (e.g., 2032/33): Because the Nepali New Year begins in mid-April (1st of Baisakh), a single Nepali year overlaps two Gregorian years. Furthermore, Nepal's fiscal and academic years typically run from mid-July to mid-July. Therefore, a policy marked 2032/33 BS refers to a period spanning parts of 1975 and 1976 AD.
  - Policy Examples: The School Education Sector Plan (SESP) is cited as 2022–2032 AD, which corresponds to 2079–2089 BS.

Organisation of chapters

The organisational structure of the chapters aims to capture the fluidity with which policy reforms are experienced and enacted by teachers and learners.

Chapter 2 offers the contextual background for the study, covering Nepal's history, culture, structures and worldviews. It is divided into three sections:

The first section provides an overview of Nepal's political, historical, and structural context. It then traces the evolution of the education system and the impact of political and social shifts.

The second section discusses the phenomenon of travelling policies focused on learner-centredness. It unpacks their integration and reinterpretation at the local, national and global levels making them part of the dynamic

'policyscape'(Carney, 2009). It argues that policies can become symbolic (Ball, 2012b) when they fail to address structural and contextual realities.

The final section explores the literature around indigenous and local knowledge, its discourses, and its importance to Nepali identity. It also examines how these conceptions relate to structural inequalities and power dynamics, offering a deeper perspective of the contextual realities behind the reforms. Additionally, it explains the karmic cycle worldview, using it as a metaphor for the repeated failures of reforms to produce lasting change.

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework guiding this study and clarifies the use of the two central ideas, context and pedagogy. Context is taken as fluid and constantly evolving (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b), while pedagogy encompasses both the act of teaching and the discourse (Alexander, 2000). I justify the selection of the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and the onto-cultural perspective as the lenses that allow the study to capture pedagogical practices shaped by structural, contextual, and cultural factors (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). The onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) further integrates the cultural values and worldviews of teachers and learners into the understanding of these practices. Together, these perspectives feed back into the thesis's metaphor of how certain practices perpetuate the karmic cycle because they are entangled with structural and cultural realities.

Chapter 4 explores Learner-Centred Education (LCE) as a travelling policy. To do so, it examines its theoretical foundations and the rationales for its proposal. Furthermore, it illustrates how LCE is broad and contested with multiple interpretations. Some authors outright reject LCE (Guthrie, 2011, 2012, 2017; Tabulawa, 1997, 2013) while others argue it should be contextualised, emphasising 'learning-centred' approaches (Lattimer, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2004), rather than focusing on precise definitions. To understand the current pedagogical practices in the post-LCE reform context, I draw on Minimum Standards (MS) for LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013), which also serve as the organising framework for the findings.

Building on this, ***Chapter 5*** presents the empirical evidence around the implementation of LCE across Low-Income Countries (LICs). It traces the patterns of implementation across different countries and contexts and what

this means for the Nepali case. The chapter draws on major reviews to identify common challenges and enabling factors in LCE implementation. It highlights how contextual realities, resource constraints, and cultural beliefs shape these patterns and how children's experiences are often overlooked. Taken together, these insights challenge deficit narratives and provide a comparative backdrop for understanding Nepal's own cyclical reform patterns, informing the empirical analysis in the following chapters.

Chapter 6 presents the teachers and children as central actors in understanding the existing pedagogical practice and examines the discourses surrounding them. It outlines teachers' roles, working conditions, and the contextual realities that shape their professional identities, drawing on existing literature and relevant identity frameworks. The chapter also highlights how deficit narratives and globalised expectations obscure the complexities of teachers' work. In addition, it brings in the often-overlooked perspectives of children, challenging universalised assumptions and showing why their voices are essential for understanding pedagogical practices in Nepal's reform context.

Chapter 7 provides a detailed discussion of the study's methodology and methods, including and justifying the research design, Comparative Case Study (CCS) (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b), and philosophical assumptions that guided the decision to be embedded in the schools. It also discusses the ethical considerations that guided this study. The methods section describes how the data was generated across three different schools over 27 weeks, during which 308 lessons were observed, and through semi-structured interviews with teachers and close collaboration with children over the duration of my fieldwork. The data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022a).

Chapters 8-11 present the findings, begins with a preface that establishes the context and details the organisation of the subsequent chapters. *Chapters 8* to *11* report the study's findings, organised around pedagogical practices within the framework of the palette of practices (Barrett, 2007) and the Minimum Standards (Schweisfurth, 2013). Specifically, *Chapter 8* presents Findings Part I, *Chapter 9* covers Findings Part II, *Chapter 10* discusses Findings Part III, and *Chapter 11* details Findings Part IV.

Chapter 12 is the discussion chapter. It synthesises the empirical findings presented in the previous chapters and interprets them through the pedagogical nexus and the onto-cultural perspective. It also revisits the metaphor of the karmic cycle to explain recurring patterns of reform failure and partial implementation in Nepal's education system. The chapter draws together the key pedagogical patterns identified in the study and discusses how they are shaped by broader contextual and cultural realities.

Chapter 13**, Conclusion,** draws on the study's key findings, links back to the research questions, discusses the study's implications and contributions, including recommendations for policies, and identifies future research areas.

Chapter 2. The complex context, scales, policy landscape and reform policy in Nepal

This chapter provides the contextual foundation for the study. While elements of context are woven throughout the thesis, this chapter offers a focused overview of Nepal's historical, cultural, structural and educational landscape to situate the research within its broader setting.

The first section provides a snapshot of the Nepali context: its structural, political and historical landscape. It then turns to Nepal's education system and its evolution, tracing how political and social transformations have shaped schooling. Contextual illustrations of the study schools, drawn from the data, are also included to provide a grounded backdrop.

The second section discusses the policies that guide the Nepali education system and its reform, with the focus being on learner-centredness. It illustrates how these policies are integrated into 'policyscapes' (Carney, 2009) through global educational discourses and policy borrowing.

Given the complexity of reform implementation, the third section discusses indigenous knowledge and the various discourses surrounding it. It traces how these are connected to Nepali indigeneity and how it is entangled with persistent structural inequalities and the hegemony of certain powers over others (Onta, 2021; Pradhan, 2020b).

Contextual overview of Nepal

Historical and political snapshot

Nepal, a landlocked Himalayan country between India and China, has always been culturally diverse while historically Hindu. Until 2006, it was the world's only Hindu kingdom; thereafter, it became a secular republic. Buddhism also shapes its cultural fabric (Gellner, 2007). This diversity has influenced political and educational trajectories, often framed through contrasting narratives: a majestic, welcoming nation versus one marked by poverty, instability, and donor dependence (Gellner, 2015; Pigg, 1992).

Unlike most South Asian countries, Nepal was never formally colonised, yet it remained entangled in colonial projects through ties with British India and, later, India's influence, thereby reinforcing imperial ideologies in governance

and education (Des Chene, 2007; Pradhan, 2020b). Since the 1950s, Nepal has experienced repeated upheavals, including the fall of the Rana regime, the Panchayat era, the 1990 democratic movement, and a decade-long armed conflict ending in 2006 (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2005; Pherali and Garratt, 2014). These culminated in the abolition of the monarchy and the adoption of federalism in 2007, though contestations over identity and caste still persist (Gellner et al., 2012). Recent anti-corruption protests by Gen Z in 2025 underscore the ongoing instability.

Education reforms have mirrored these political cycles, each regime attempting to use schooling to shape national identity, often privileging dominant groups and sidelining marginalised voices (Caddell, 2007a; Carney and Bista, 2009; Onta, 1996b). This historical backdrop frames the recurring disconnect between policy visions and classroom realities that this thesis explores.

A snapshot of caste hierarchy

Modern Nepal was unified in 1768 under Prithvi Narayan Shah, who declared Hinduism the state religion and institutionalised its social hierarchy. This structure was codified in the *Muluki Ain* (1854), which categorised all groups into a single ritual-purity-based hierarchy (Bista, 1991). Non-Hindu ethnic communities, such as *Newars* and *Janajatis*, were classified as *Matwali* (alcohol drinkers), ranked below *tagadhari* high-caste Hindus but above occupational castes (Bista, 1991). Despite internal complexity, this legal framework merged diverse systems into one hierarchy, reinforcing elite dominance and cultural hegemony (Fisher, 2007; Gellner, 2015, 2016). See *Figure 1* for the caste system representation.

Figure 1: AI generated representation of the caste system of Nepal



The caste system remains deeply embedded in Nepali society, sustaining structural inequalities and privileging dominant groups who speak the Nepali language and are often from the hills (*pahad)* (Caddell, 2007a; Pradhan, 2022; Shields and Rappleye, 2008a). Additionally, there are tensions between the Pahadis (hill people) and the Madhesis (the indigenous or long-settled population in the southern plains of *Nepal) (Pherali and Garratt, 2014)*. The Nepali identity has often been a contentious political matter (Lawoti and Hangen, 2012) with *Madhesis*' Nepali identities and loyalties often being contested and questioned by the state establishment (Sijapati, 2012). This is because many of them share close relational, linguistic and cultural ties across the Indian border (Sijapati, 2012). However, the groups in the southern plains (*tarai), Madhesis* are not homogenous. They also include the indigenous population, such as the *Tharus*

who often assert a distinct identity from the broader *Madhesi political label*. These historical legacies underpin persistent disparities in access to resources and educational opportunities, shaping aspirations and reform trajectories. In the interpretive frame of this thesis, they represent *sanchita karma*, the stored past, that continues to influence Nepal's karmic cycle of policy reform. Each new reform effort inherits these accumulated legacies, making them critical to understanding why ambitious policies repeatedly collide with entrenched social structures.

Snapshot of cultural assumptions and social norms

Nepali society is deeply collectivist, rooted in a kinship network and emphasising social harmony. Respect for elders and authority is paramount, and children are expected to obey without question (Cole et al., 2006). In this context, authority and hierarchy are not merely structural; they are cultural logics that underpin everyday schooling and influence how education is experienced.

Dor Bahadur Bista's seminal work, Fatalism and Development (1991), deepens this understanding. It argues that Nepal's orientation toward fatalism, where success and failure are perceived as predetermined, reinforces hierarchical norms. This discourages individual agency. It promotes a worldview maintained by elite dominance (Bista, 1991), sustains dependency and hampers innovation. This creates a cycle where structural inequalities and cultural logics reinforce each other. Instead of challenging the status quo, they keep it in place. Education becomes framed as a pathway to destiny rather than a space for critical engagement. However, it is equally important to note that Bista's (1991) analysis was based on fieldwork in the 1980s, and Nepal has evolved significantly since then. At the same time, culture cannot be understood as fixed or deterministic. While aspects of Bista's analysis continue to resonate with this study's findings, the data also reveal moments of agency in which teachers and learners challenge and reinterpret these cultural norms.

The importance of being 'educated'

Education in Nepal is not only a state project but also a cultural aspiration tied to modernity, material progress, and the promise of a better life (Pigg, 1992; Valentin, 2006). Schooling is seen as a way out of the illiterate life of previous generations (Karki, 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2015). Some describe this as a blind

faith in education, believing that education is transformative even though the outcomes are uncertain (Karki, 2023).

Being educated is equated with disciplined and respectable conduct (Valentine, 2011). Caddell (2006), shows how schools mould 'modern citizens' through visible markers, clean uniforms, tidy hair, and correct pronunciation, signifying quality education. These practices reflect cultural hierarchies that privilege conformity over critical engagement (Caddell, 2007b). Education thus becomes less about dialogic learning and more about producing disciplined bodies aligned with national and global norms.

All these efforts aim to promote *bikas* (development/progress) (Pigg, 1992). This is seen as achievable through education, which provides hope for those at the margins (Madsen and Carney, 2011). However, education is also linked to fulfilling materialistic dreams that the 'globalised and developed world (Western powers)' appears to embody (Liechty, 2003). The belief is that modernism in Nepal arises through development (*bikas*), which is viewed as inherently positive and follows a uniform pattern or process for everyone, regardless of context (Regmi, 2021). Consequently, education is considered an investment that fosters human capital development and contributes to the country's growth (Regmi, 2021).

A demographic snapshot

According to the 2021 Census, Nepal has a population of almost twenty-nine million people who belong to 123 caste and ethnic groups[1], speak 126 languages and practise ten religions (National Statistics Office, 2023). The largest ethnic population is only 16% of the total population (National Statistics Office, 2023). However, 83.1% are Hindu and 44% speak the Nepali language as their mother tongue (ibid.). In *Table 1*, I present the composition of the Nepali population as per the 2021 Census.

[1] The distinction between caste and ethnic group is blurred in Nepal because of the use of different terminology that cannot be translated exactly. For instance, the Nepali word *thar* denotes a person's last name, but it can also be used to mean or denote a person's caste. Similarly, the word *jat* can be used to denote not only caste but also tribal or ethnic group. Fisher (2001) provides a helpful discussion of the difficulties of understanding caste, ethnicity, and tribal groups in Nepal.

Table 1: Demographic overview of Nepal

Religion	Proportion of Population
Hinduism	81.20%
Buddhism	8.20%
Islam	5.1%
Kirat	3.20%
Christianity	1.80%
Nature worshipper	0.50%

Mother Tongue	Proportion of Population
Nepali	44.90%
Maithili	11%
Bhojpuri	6.2%
Tharu	5.9 %
Tamang	4.9 %
Bajika	3.9%
Newar	3.0%
Magar	2.80%

Caste/ Ethnicity	Proportion of Population
Chhetri (Hill)	16.40%
Bahun (Brahmin)-Hill	11.30%
Magar	6.9%
Tharu	6.2%
Tamang	5.6%
Bishwokarma	5.00%
Newar	4.6%
Yadav	4.2%

Snapshot of the School Education System

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees free and compulsory basic education up to grade twelve and emphasises inclusivity across caste, ethnicity, gender, and disability (MoEST, 2021). It also ensures primary education in the mother tongue to promote equitable access (Constitution of Nepal, (2015). The School Education Sector Plan (SESP, 2022/23–2031/32) envisions an inclusive, high-quality system that empowers learners as competent, responsible citizens (MoEST, 2022).

Nepal's school structure comprises three levels (MoEST, 2022):

- **Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED):** A two-year programme that prepares children for formal schooling through play-based approaches.
- **Basic Education:** Grades 1–8, for ages 5–13.
- **Secondary Education:** Grades 9–12, for ages 13–17 (MoEST, 2022).

Schools fall into three categories (1971b):

- **Community schools** (public, state-funded, managed by local communities).
- **Institutional schools** (private, fee-paying, largely excluded from reforms).
- **Religious/traditional schools** (e.g., Madrassas, Gumbas, Ashrams, combining religious instruction with the national curriculum).

According to the Education Regulation (1971b) community schools in Nepal must remain open for 220 days each year, with at least 190 days dedicated exclusively to teaching–learning processes (ibid.). Within this structure, government-

appointed teachers are expected to teach six 40-minute periods per day, amounting to roughly four hours of direct instruction daily, or 760 hours annually (ibid.). School hours typically run from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM, Sunday through Thursday, with a half-day on Friday and a holiday on Saturday. Local governments may adjust these timings provided they meet the national minimum of 832 annual instructional hours for students (ibid.).

Similarly, the Education rules state that the teacher–student ratio in Nepal is fixed at 1:30 in the Himalayan (*himali*) region, 1:40 in the hilly (*pahad*) region, and 1:50 in the flat plains (*tarai*) and Kathmandu Valley (1971b). In practice, the teacher–student ratio differs across provinces, districts, and schools. It is notably higher in the *tarai* and lower in the Himalayan region (ibid.).

This study centres on community schools, as the reforms primarily focus on them. In alignment with Nepal's federal governance structures, community schools operate under the direct jurisdiction and oversight of local authorities (Government of Nepal, 1971b). The School Management Committee (SMC) remains the primary executive body responsible for the school's daily operations and management. The SMC comprises parents, teachers, and community representatives. The Education Act (1971a) amended 2016 and Education Regulation (1971b) provide the legal framework for SMC operations, aiming to foster community ownership and accountability. In practice, however, these participatory models often falter due to politicisation and resource constraints (Bhatta and Pherali, 2017; Carney and Bista, 2009).

A snapshot of classroom realities in the study schools

Having outlined the structural organisation of Nepal's school system, it is important to consider how these structures are lived and experienced in everyday practice. Context functions not as a passive backdrop but as an active force shaping classroom practices (Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024). To provide a sense of these everyday realities, I now present the material and environmental conditions of the three study schools, which help illustrate how teaching and learning were influenced within their specific contexts.

Resource scarcity was a significant constraint across all three schools. In both Shree Maya and Shree Siddhartha, the number of available textbooks was not sufficient for all students. Some students did not have pencils or writing

materials and teachers often kept an 'extra supply' of stationery to ensure that every child had something to write with or write on. It was also common to see children breaking pencils in half so they could share them with friends.

All three schools' classrooms had almost identical layouts, with benches and desks attached and arranged in rows and columns, facing the whiteboard and the teacher's desk or chair at the front. Whiteboards were worn out in all three schools. Teachers and students often used paper as dusters to wipe the boards, or brought cloth from home.

Shree Maya's rooms in winter became extremely cold as the sun did not reach the classrooms. Teachers would often have to conduct lessons outside if the classrooms were too cold. Conversely, at Shree Siddhartha, as the summer became extremely hot (45 degrees), the classrooms became difficult to manage due to the large number of students, and the ceiling fans were not enough to cope with the heat, which in turn affected teaching and learning. In Shree Saraswati, the classrooms for grades four, five, and six were poorly lit. During the monsoon, when heavy rains made it dark, the classes were too dim for learning because there was no electricity. Additionally, dust frequently fell from the upper floors when students walked in the rooms above.

A snapshot of the evolution of school education

Nepal's education history reflects contesting ideals and continuous shifts in vision (Carney and Bista, 2009) as can be seen in *Table 2*. Each reform cycle sought to 'fix' systemic issues but often reproduced the same tensions, a recurring pattern central to this thesis.

Table 2: Major phases of Educational Development (adapted from Khanal, 2011)

Period	Educational Development	Focus
1846–1951	Education restricted to Rana rulers and elites; Indian and English tutors for the privileged few	Maintain control by denying public access
1951–1970	Unplanned expansion; community-led initiatives; donor presence increased; Nepali imposed as medium	Expansion amid instability; language debates
1971–1990	Panchayat regime: nationalisation, standardisation, Nepali enforced	Build national identity; align content with ideology
1990–Present	Democratisation, decentralisation, rise of privatisation; donor-driven reforms	Emphasis on equity and quality; persistent disconnect

Before the 1950s, schooling was inaccessible to the general public. Education was reserved for the Rana oligarchy, reinforcing structural inequality. The 1951 overthrow of the regime opened the door for public education, and donor influence soon shaped Nepal's first national plan (Parajuli et al., 2021; Rappleye, 2019). Language became a contentious issue, with Nepali imposed as the medium despite resistance in the *tarai* (Rappleye, 2019).

Under the Panchayat system (1971–1990), education became a tool for nation-building, enforcing uniformity and ideological control (Onta, 2021; Parajuli, 2021b).

Post-1990 reforms introduced decentralisation and privatisation, framed as democratisation. Schools were handed back to communities under World Bank guidance, with SMCs revived, but these spaces became politicised, reinforcing elite dominance (Carney and Rappleye, 2011). Private schools arose as symbols of discipline and upward mobility, deepening inequalities (Bhatta, 2021b; Caddell, 2006). Federal restructuring after 2015 added complexity, transferring authority to local governments and triggering resistance from teachers' unions (Uprety, 2021a). These tensions illustrate how structural reforms repeatedly collide with entrenched cultural and political logics, feeding the cyclical nature of reform discussed throughout this thesis.

Unravelling and situating Nepali education 'policyscape' in the global context and discourse

Stephen Carney (2009) argues that global educational policies are shared ideologies. These connect very different countries to implement reforms often driven by global discourses. They include neo-liberalisation of education for economic growth and the adoption of Learner-Centred Education (LCE), which are seen as the most suitable approaches to lay the foundations of a democratic society (Carney, 2009). He refers to Appadurai's (1996) concept of 'ideascapes', in which ideas are not confined to nation-states but are fluid and flow across countries as they are interconnected.

Building on this global discourse, there is a widespread belief that education is crucial for developing capable human resources needed for a knowledge economy, emphasising the job-market success of well-skilled individuals (Tikly and Barrett, 2013; Verger et al., 2018b). Consequently, education reform and

improvement have become vital priorities for governments, especially in low-income countries (LICs), as they work to transform their economies (Ball, 1998; Jessop, 2008).

However, the fluidity of global education policies does not entail a linear, clear-cut implementation. Rather, it is reinterpreted and adopted through cultural lenses, which often lead to unintended consequences in policy implementation (Carney et al., 2007). As a result, it is important to interpret education reforms, such as LCE, as continually shaped and reshaped within local contexts, rather than as static concepts or reforms (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

The Nepali education reforms are integrated into the global 'policyscapes' (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b; Carney, 2009), and this fluidity is evident where global ideals of learner-centredness intersect with local socio-cultural realities.

The Nepali education 'policyscape' in context

Expanding on this global policy discourse and reflecting on the dynamic fluidity of the 'policyscape' (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b; Carney, 2009), I now focus on Nepal's three most recent education policies and how these manifest in practice. These policies implement reforms through pooled funding and national plans.

Nepal's government has adopted a Sector Wide Approach (SWAp) for collaborative funding and execution of education reform policies (MoEST, 2021, 2022). Under this framework, Nepal and its international Joint Financial Partners (JFPs) pool resources and technical support to implement a unified, nationally driven education plan. The aim is to move reform efforts away from fragmented, isolated projects and ensure that donor funding is aligned with the government's budget and national priorities (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022). Additionally, this approach seeks to enhance accountability and sustainability in achieving national goals, such as improving the quality of school education and making education more accessible and equitable for all (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022).

As the study focuses on understanding pedagogical practices in the context of post-LCE reforms, this section examines the most recent three education policies implemented in Nepal: the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP, 2009–2016), the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP, 2016/17–2022/23), and the current School Education Sector Plan (SESP, 2022/23–2031/32). Each plan introduced

new priorities, including federalisation, ICT integration, and disaster resilience. Across all three reforms, a consistent vision emerges: policies align with global education agendas while committing, at least conceptually, to a shift towards LCE (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022).

To illustrate how these priorities are embedded in national education reform policies, *Table 3* compares the three major reform policies by highlighting their governance structures, equity and quality focus, and evolving strategies for implementing LCE.

Table 3: Overview of SSRP, SSDP and SESP

Aspect	**SSRP (2009-2016)**	**SSDP (2016-2021)**	**SESP (2022-2032)**
Full Form	School Sector Reform Plan	School Sector Development Plan	School Education Sector Plan
Governance	Centralised	Transition to federalism	Fully federalized (3-tier governance)
Main Goal	Unify grades 1–12, expand access and move to learner-centred education	Improve equity, quality, governance, and move to learner-centred education	Inclusive, resilient, ICT-enabled education and learner-centred
Equity Focus	Marginalised groups, gender parity	Consolidated Equity Strategy	Inclusive Education Roadmap, gender and disability
Quality Focus	Curriculum reform, teacher training	NASA (National Assessment of Student Achievement), teacher licensing	Foundational learning, ICT integration, teacher Professional Development
Technology	Minimal	Early ICT integration	Full-scale ICT, digital learning platforms
Crisis Response	Not addressed	Limited disaster preparedness	Strong resilience focus (Plan for COVID-19)
Monitoring	EMIS (Education Management Information System)	EMIS/IEMIS (Integrated EMIS), performance audits	IEMIS, results-based monitoring

Table 3 clearly outlines a set of consistent objectives that embody the country's long-term vision for its education system. These goals align with international educational benchmarks, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All (EFA), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Regmi, 2017). All three policies emphasise universal access and participation, aiming to ensure every child receives basic education irrespective of background. They also focus on quality and relevance, including curriculum reform, teacher

training, and better learning outcomes. The focus is on shifting from a passive, teacher-centred model to a learner-centred approach, where students actively co-construct knowledge within a supportive and fear-free learning environment (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022).

Furthermore, each policy addresses governance and management of schools, evolving from a centralised system under SSRP to a fully federalised structure in SESP, aligning with Nepal's broader political transition. Lastly, promoting literacy and life skills remains a fundamental goal, with increasing focus on ICT integration and resilience during natural disasters.

The shared objectives across SSRP, SSDP, and SESP, such as universal access, improved quality, strengthened governance, and promotion of life skills, are also present in Nepal's educational legal and regulatory frameworks. The *Shiksha Ain* (Education Act 2028 BS/(1971a) provides the legal mandate for free and compulsory basic education. It defines school types and outlines governance structures, reinforcing the policy focus on access and decentralisation (ibid.). *Shiksha Niyamwali* (Education Regulations 2059 BS/(2002) operationalises these provisions. It details the roles of SMCs, teacher recruitment processes, and accountability mechanisms, thereby supporting the policy documents' governance and quality goals. Similarly, the Teachers Service Code (TSC) (2057 BS/(2000) aligns with the policies' focus on teacher professionalism and quality education through its licensing system, merit-based recruitment, and service conditions. Together, these legal instruments feed back into the policy vision. However, based on my reading, the policies are changing, whereas the regulations and legal framework have not kept pace.

Table 4 presents an overview of funding for the three policies. showing total estimated costs, government and donor contributions, and funding gaps extracted from the respective documents SSRP (MoE, 2009); SSRP (MoE, 2016); SESP (MoEST, 2022).

Table 4: Financial overview of SSRP, SSDP and SESP

Policy	Total Estimated Cost (USD)	Government Contribution (USD)	Donor Contribution (USD)	Funding Gap (USD)
SSRP (2009–2016)	4.04 billion	3.148 billion	0.50 billion	0.392 billion
SSDP (2016–2021)	10.58 billion	9.50 billion	0.58 billion	0.50 billion
SESP (2022–2032)	8.40 billion	6.60 billion	0.78 billion	1.02 billion

The financial trends across these three reform periods reveal an important aspect of Nepal's policy landscape that shapes both implementation and outcomes. It is essential to note the funding gaps present across the policies. While the implications are beyond the scope of this study. It is critical for readers to keep in mind these persistent funding gaps, which may, in turn, affect the interpretation and implementation of policies. These funding gaps also highlight why aligning with global agendas is strategically important for securing donor assistance (Regmi, 2021).

Principles guiding Nepali education reforms

The current education reform policy, SESP, explicitly aligns with three key LCE principles, reinforcing Nepal's commitment to implementing LCE. My review of the SSRP (2009-2015) and SSDP (2016/17-2022/23) shows that these LCE principles have consistently driven classroom and pedagogical reforms over time.

Active and involved learning (cognition) – where learners co-construct knowledge through collaboration, moving away from memorisation of knowledge (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022).

Emancipation and empowerment of children – by instilling democratic values and social justice, enabling them to critically engage with and reflect on society (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022).

Preparation of human resources – to help contribute to the country's economy and transformation (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022).

All these principles correspond with the three justifications presented by the advocates of LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013) (see *Chapter 4*). While these principles appear progressive on paper, their translation into practice has been fraught with challenges (Schweisfurth, 2011).

Global agendas and reinterpretation of reform ideals

This alignment with global education goals has led to a confusing situation

> *"where the unhealthy mix of liberalisation and the unidirectional globalisation led by the West, often theorised as neoliberalism, shifted the educational goal of Nepal away from its local and community contexts, resulting in the faulty representation of its educational problems" Regmi(2022, p.425).*

Regmi (2021, 2022) argues that donor organisations have further helped the ruling class maintain ideological and economic control over society through mass education. This has resulted in a disjuncture between contextual realities and policy demands (Bhatta, 2011). Furthermore, education reform is associated with economic growth, and when this does not happen, it is considered a failure (Rappleye, 2019; Regmi, 2021). As a result, educational policies have had unintended consequences at the grassroots levels (Carney et al., 2007).

When reforms are implemented in LICs, they often result in unexpected outcomes that can do more harm than good (Napier, 2005). Carney and Bista (2009) assessed the impact of the World Bank's initiative of 'transferring' Nepal's government school management to local community stakeholders. Based on a genealogical analysis since 1990, they concluded that the actions of the World Bank had negative consequences that were not anticipated by policymakers. Even when the concept of community ownership was accepted as a way to decentralise and democratise, it was the elite groups, the *Bahuns* and *Chettris*, who benefited most from this handover of power (Carney and Bista, 2009). Furthermore, it created space for new power structures, in which local political actors became more involved in school management as a façade to pursue their political agendas (Carney et al., 2007; Carney and Bista, 2009). Therefore, it becomes imperative to consider grassroots realities to improve schools (Parajuli et al., 2021).

This pattern is explained by the concept of 'symbolic policy' (Ball, 1994), which highlights how reforms often serve political legitimacy rather than substantive change. Highly rationalised solutions may not result in the anticipated changes because education is a complex system without straightforward answers (Fullan, 2006). Another critical issue is that superficial reforms, enacted quickly, are often perceived as successful, functioning more to demonstrate action or secure continued support than addressing real problems (Fullan, 2012). Ball and colleagues suggest that policies are frequently implemented to generate political legitimacy and create the illusion of action rather than to produce substantial material change (Ball et al., 2017).

Therefore, when global policies are adapted, they are reshaped locally, as they are influenced by multiple relationships (Ball et al., 2017). As a result, the actual outcome often diverges significantly from the original objectives or

intended policy vision. Imported reform ideals, including LCE, frequently undergo modification, becoming localised or encountering resistance, leading to varied policy implementation patterns (Stambach, 2016).

The National Curriculum: understanding and unpacking its expectations

The National Curriculum serves as a snapshot into how the envisioned education reforms, particularly those of LCE, are interpreted and translated in the national Nepali context. The National Curriculum details the expected teaching and learning practices, educational objectives, and the competencies children should develop during their basic schooling (grades one to eight) (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). This curriculum outlines competencies to foster holistic development and responsible citizenship, with students expected to become "self-reliant, hardworking, scientifically informed, health-conscious, and ethical" CDC(2019, p.2–5). The core philosophy emphasises a shift from traditional rote learning to LCE approaches, nurturing the "inherent potential of each child" CDC(2019, p.6). Ultimately, this approach aspires to cultivate individuals who embody patriotism, democratic values, environmental awareness, and human values (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b), thereby prioritising both cognitive growth and preparation for future responsibilities.

The National Curriculum adopts a competency-based approach in its design (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). According to the document, "the emphasis should be on ensuring that children can do something (apply) in real life rather than know the content and not be able to engage with it" CDC(2019, p.9) . The key skill areas include:

- **Cognitive/academic skills:** language, communication, critical thinking, mathematics, and science.
- **Socio-emotional/civic qualities:** patriotism, democratic values, human values, and global citizenship.
- **Practical/life skills:** environmental awareness, health, and vocational/soft skills.
- **Cultural/creative development, art, literature, and culture.**

Implicitly, the curriculum promotes active learning, practical application, and inquiry-based methods, going beyond the acquisition of academic content to develop well-rounded individuals. So, in principle, it aligns with the policy

visions set out with the current policy, SESP, and the previous ones, SSDP and SSRP.

Within the National Curriculum, the skills to be acquired in basic education are divided into subparts by grade level, organised into three groups: grades one to three, four and five, and six to eight (CDC, 2022a, 2022b). An integrated curriculum is to be taught from grades one to three. The primary aim of basic education, as outlined in the National Curriculum, is to promote sequential, cumulative learning over the years (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). This approach emphasises the holistic development of children (ibid.). It equips learners with essential skills in literacy, numeracy, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving. These skills assist them in managing increasing academic challenges and real-world situations as they advance through primary education (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b).

Table 5 examines explicitly the Nepali subject and the basic-level skills children are expected to acquire.

Table 5: Skills progression in the Nepali subject across grades one to eight (MoEST, CDC, 2019)

Grade Level	Core competencies	Illustration
Grades one to three	Foundational literacy and basic oral communication skills	Identifying and pronouncing letters
		Reading daily
		Using appropriate language in conversations and dialogues.
		Basic vocabulary acquisition (i.e. family, school, social environments)
		Use of simple sentences.
		Understanding and responding to basic emotional cues.
		Encoding/decoding letters and imitating writing patterns.
		Understanding and responding to basic emotional expressions.
Grades four to five	Intermediate Comprehension, Expression and Early Analytical Skills	Interpreting and discussing simple subject matter.
		Expressing thoughts by understanding word meanings in text.
		Responding to questions based on pictures and stories.

Grade Level	Core competencies	Illustration
		Describing seen/experienced events and expressing feelings about familiar people.
		Discussing ideas based on imagination and describing the main ideas of the story.
		Writing simple words, sentences, descriptions, and requests.
Grades six to eight	Advanced Analytical Skills, Critical Engagement and Multipurpose Application: Listening and Speaking	Engaging in complex conversations, discussions, questions and answers, understanding implicit messages, gist, analysing socio-cultural contexts, using various communication media, and critical information collection. media; critical information collection.
	Reading	Reading articles/ with appropriate pronunciation, speed, and flow; deep comprehension of context, gist, and message; analysing textual structure; comprehending informational and practical skills.
	Writing	Copying/dictating with correct punctuation/orthography; identifying word structure; using diverse vocabulary (synonyms, antonyms, idioms, technical terms); describing events using pictures/symbols; composing text with correct linguistic usage (grammar, tense, voice, mood) and cultural integration
	Overall goal by the end of grade eight	Correct pronunciation; use of language in cultural/social contexts; natural reactions/responses; use of communication skills in various writing forms; presenting ideas with analytical reactions; analysis/evaluation of subject matter; problem-solving via critical/creative thinking; reading for purpose/intention; appropriate language use based on context/environment.

The Nepali subject curriculum outlined above aims to foster skills based on cognitive engagement and prepare students for future learning. Despite its focus on developing skills and competencies, it remains very prescriptive, outcome-focused, and highly detailed. Throughout the grades, the learning achievements are remarkably detailed, with broad skills broken down into very specific elements, such as grammatical points or text types (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b).

This, in effect, clearly defines what must be taught and learned, leaving little room for learners and teachers to negotiate, co-construct, or adapt learning to the specific contexts of each classroom. As the learning outcomes are so specific, they reflect the implicit value policymakers place on knowledge and skills (e.g., describing an event using images and text structures) (Brinkmann, 2019). The Nepali subject has a clear step-by-step roadmap. It guides teachers on what to teach and how to teach it. This can reduce the space for both teachers and learners as they negotiate and engage in the learning process (Ho and Dimmock, 2023).

Therefore, in essence, the highly detailed subject curriculum stands in almost complete disjuncture with its own policy directives. The focus in the policy is on ensuring the implementation of LCE through the development of competencies. This is intended to nurture individual potential, catering to learners' needs, and creating space for them to critically engage with what they learn (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). However, the curriculum seems to take little account of the teachers' contextual realities or experiences. Furthermore, such a detailed curriculum reflects an unspoken value, the assumption that knowledge or skill is transferred and that children are like empty slates. Teachers in the study also share this value and belief as discussed in Chapters *8*, *9* and *12*.

A snapshot of the assessment and examination culture in Nepal

Successive education reforms such as SSRP (2009–2015), SSDP (2016/17–2022/23), and SESP (2022/23–2031/32) emphasise a shift from high-stakes summative assessments to ongoing formative assessments. The goal is to promote a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning. To do this, the Continuous Assessment System (CAS) has been implemented (CDC, 2007; MoE, 2009, 2016). This was a deliberate effort to ensure that "emphasis will be given to Continuous Assessment System (CAS) to assess the expected learning outcomes, behavioural change, attitudes, competency, skill and the application of feedback for teaching learning activities" (CDC, 2007, p. 47). Teachers are asked to use both formative and summative assessment techniques and switch to letter grading instead of marks and percentages (CDC, 2007). The Ministry of Education assumed that the change in the assessment system would ensure the switch to LCE (CDC, 2007; MoE, 2009, 2016). CAS was introduced as a distinct

directive in the 2009 education policy (SSDP), but its implementation has been "far from effective" (MoE, 2016, p. 56).

Despite all these efforts, examinations occupy a central and enduring place in Nepal's education system, shaping not only how learning is evaluated but also how it is understood, experienced, and enacted across schools (Mathema, 2007; Regmi, 2023). Written exams are content-centred, and they retain high cultural and institutional value (Budhathoki et al., 2025). They are widely regarded as the most legitimate and reliable indicators of learning, with students' performance understood as tangible evidence of academic progress. This belief is deeply embedded in societal expectations; parents, teachers, and communities often equate exam success with personal discipline, intelligence, and future potential (Budhathoki et al., 2025; Mainali and Heck, 2017).

This is further reinforced by systems such as the National Assessments for Student Achievement (NASA) that measure student achievement and quality of education (Poudel and Bhattarai, 2018). The assessments are made for grades three and five and assess subjects including Maths, Nepali, and English (ibid.). Additionally, the government's scheme for selecting model schools includes academic performance as one of the key criteria (MoE, 2016). Recognising the importance of exam culture provides a necessary foundation for understanding the pedagogical practices documented in later chapters and offers insight into why learner-centred reforms have struggled to take root within Nepal's complex educational landscape.

Synthesising the policy contradictions

> *"Even if major policy documents (GON,1992, 1997, 2003, 2009, 2016) were still written by the individuals appointed by the GON they focused on aligning Nepal's educational policies with the global agendas and goals (Bhatta, 2011). Instead of having public debates for understanding the real needs of rural communities (Parajuli, 2019) most of the policy agendas proposed in those documents are justified using the logic of neoliberalism that seeks solutions of Nepal's educational problems through the means of privatisation and increased involvement of non-state actors (World Bank, 2001, 2010)." Regmi(2022, p. 425)*

Regmi's critique emphasises the core tension discussed here. While Nepal's national actors have authored key policy documents, these primarily align with the global agenda and neoliberal priorities. They largely neglect local needs or contexts, or engagement appears superficial. This analysis, along with the review of the SSRP, SSDP, SESP, and the National Curriculum, reveals a contradiction. Policies often hint at progressive, learner-centred ideals. However, the curriculum remains highly prescriptive. It leaves little room for teachers' or learners' agency. As a result, it reflects a deep disconnect with the lived experiences of Nepali society, where these education policies are envisioned to bring change (Pradhan and Valentin, 2021; Regmi, 2024)

The trajectory of Nepal's education reforms thus reveals a recurring pattern: ambitious policies shaped by global ideals, yet implementation consistently faltering due to a disconnect from local realities (Carney and Bista, 2009; Regmi, 2024).

Indigenous knowledge: not as clear and definable as meets the eye?

We now turn to ideas of indigenous and local knowledge systems. Knowledge is not a neutral entity; it is socially constructed through cultural practices and worldviews (de Sousa Santos, 2007). These epistemologies shape what is considered legitimate knowledge and how learning occurs (Apple, 2012). The existing pedagogical practices, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation from these cultural logics (Apple, 2012; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019).

Understanding how indigenous and local knowledge manifests in the Nepali context is therefore essential for understanding pedagogical practices, teaching-learning processes, and experiences in Nepal. This helps us further to understand how cultural worldviews, authority structures, and epistemic traditions shape classroom interactions. This discussion lays the groundwork for the theoretical framework in *Chapter 3*, where the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) help explain how these worldviews are enacted, resisted, or reinterpreted in everyday teaching and learning.

Defining indigenous knowledge can reduce it to a fixed set of characteristics, risking the loss of its depth, fluidity, and embeddedness in lived experiences (Onyancha et al., 2018). Rather than offering a rigid definition, this discussion

focuses on its nature. Indigenous knowledge comprises practices, values, and beliefs accumulated over generations and transmitted orally through stories and reflections rather than codified procedures (Kincheloe et al., 2011). This embeddedness means it cannot be archived as detached content; it is inseparable from the communities that embody it (Fickel et al., 2018)

Similarly, local knowledge systems are rooted in specific regions but evolve through interactions and exchanges of ideas within and beyond those regions (Dekens, 2007). It requires deep immersion in context and an exploration of how meanings are attached to behaviours and rituals (Geertz, 2008). It encompasses diverse forms, from factual knowledge of the environment to cultural beliefs and everyday practices (Antweiler, 1998). These systems are integrated into the lives of local communities, combining beliefs, values, morals, principles, and cultural practices (Dekens, 2007). Like indigenous knowledge, local knowledge shapes people's understandings, perceptions, and experiences, which is why the distinction between the two is often blurred (Dekens, 2007). Antweller (1998) and Agrawal (1996) suggest that indigenous knowledge is part of local knowledge.

In Nepal, multiple worldviews coexist, including Hindu, Buddhist, Kirati, and many other ethnic views. These shape and influence the perceptions of learning, morality, authority, and how education is viewed and experienced. This manifests in a complex and intricate worldview. At the same time, what is labelled 'local culture' is highly contestable (Dekens, 2007; Phyak, 2021a). Power dynamics play a significant role as dominant groups often define what counts as local knowledge, while alternative perspectives are marginalised or dismissed as threats to existing practices and ideologies (Phyak, 2021b). Competing versions of local knowledge often seek hegemonic control. Dominance grants the power to legitimise knowledge and practices that serve specific interests and help preserve the status quo (Phyak, 2021a, 2021b).

The local and indigenous knowledge in the Nepali context

Regarding knowledge in the Nepali context, as with any form of knowledge production, multiple interests are always at play, interacting both in conflict and in collaboration (Dekens, 2007; Phyak, 2021b). Real-time solutions to

problems also emerge from within these knowledge systems (Bediako-Amoah, 2018).

To deepen this contextual understanding, I examine three distinct knowledge systems (as examples) to illustrate how multiple epistemologies coexist and shape Nepali worldviews. The Hindu and Buddhist philosophies strongly influence Nepal's educational traditions and broader knowledge systems. The *Kirati* worldview is also presented as an example of an indigenous epistemology of an ethnic minority group. However, as discussed earlier in relation to the Nepali education system, the knowledge and worldview of the *Bahun-Chettri* (Hindu) communities have historically held hegemonic power over other ways of knowing and being (Pradhan, 2020b).

Despite these politics, the importance of local knowledge cannot be ignored — especially in education. Classrooms embody multiple perspectives of local knowledge as children bring their experiences and understandings into learning spaces (Schuelka and Engsig, 2022). Acknowledging and integrating these perspectives into teaching and learning processes is therefore essential (ibid.). This also highlights the distinction between policy discourse and grounded pedagogy. Furthermore, local and indigenous knowledge need not always be viewed through a decolonial framework. They can also serve as a perspective for better understanding the lived experiences of people in particular regions (Akshara and Sarukkai, 2020)).

Hindu (Sanskrit) and Buddhist traditions and philosophies associated with education and life

Nepal's cultural context, including its education practices, is deeply shaped by Hindu and Buddhist philosophies (Gellner et al., 2012). It is therefore essential to discuss how these traditions view education and knowledge, as they underpin the country's cultural foundations (Whelpton, 2012). I begin with the Hindu school of thought and its conception of learning.

A large collection of Sanskrit literature, known as the Vedas, provides the earliest textual references to knowledge in Hindu philosophy (Baindur, 2021). The Vedas comprise diverse texts, prose, verses, explanations of rituals, and reflections on nature (Baindur, 2021). This knowledge was transmitted orally from one generation to the next as sacred and practical wisdom, encompassing

rituals, arts, scientific knowledge, philosophy, spirituality, language, grammar, and astrology (Baindur, 2021). Importantly, the Vedas contain multiple discourses and are often presented as dialogues between different contexts, so the rigidity of prescribed ideas varies across texts (ibid.).

A core component of Hindu educational philosophy rests on the concepts of *dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha* (Lipner, 2012). *Dharma* refers to the ethical and moral principles that guide human behaviour and form the foundation for personal growth (Lipner, 2012). *Karma* is the belief that an individual's actions have consequences in both present and future lives (ibid.), emphasising living by ethical standards as per one's dharma. The ultimate goal of learning is to achieve *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of rebirth (Srivastava et al., 2013). True learning, therefore, leads to inner peace and clarity, freeing individuals from materialistic aspirations and worldly attachments (Srivastava et al., 2013).

The journey to *moksha* involves engaging deeply with the Vedas (Lipner, 2012). Teachers transmitted this knowledge orally to their *shishyas* (students). Traditionally, males from privileged castes were expected to live with their teachers for several years (Baindur, 2021). Teachers were responsible for students' well-being and moral development (ibid.). Popular Vedic texts position teachers as the primary source of knowledge and students as recipients, with teachers teaching orally (Baindur, 2021).

Students were expected to memorise verses (mantras) but also to understand and critically reflect on their meaning (Baindur, 2021). Learning occurred through oral communication, requiring attentive listening, deep thinking, and repeated meditation (Baindur, 2021). This reflects a broader Hindu view that knowledge emerges from perception, logical inference, and the authoritative word of the Vedas (Perrett, 1998). Collaboration between teacher and student furthered this process (Baindur, 2021). The Vedas do not prescribe a single teaching technique; instead, they employ varied approaches, dialogue, questioning, experiential and experimental methods, depending on the text (Baindur, 2021). Students are expected to grow in humility as they learn, while teachers are cautioned against ego and power-driven behaviour, reinforcing the need for self-reflection in learning (Baindur, 2021).

Turning to Buddhist philosophy, education and learning emphasise two key principles (Hyland, 2013). First, ascetic training teaches individuals to live in

moderation, practise self-discipline, and embrace self-denial, fostering inner peace and detachment from material concerns (Hyland, 2013). Second, Buddhist education encourages critical thought and philosophical inquiry (Schober, 2012). Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism rejects caste hierarchies and is inclusive, allowing all individuals, including women, to participate in learning (Ghimire and Sukhprasert, 2024; Schober, 2012).

Fundamentally, Buddhism views human existence as rooted in suffering ((Huxter, 2015). The ultimate goal is liberation, nirvana, achieved through the Eightfold Path, which guides individuals toward right speech, diet, lifestyle, concentration, mindfulness, and composure (Huxter, 2015). Learning involves deep contemplation, prompting students to question their beliefs, experiences, and values to understand nature and reality (Schober, 2012). Compassion toward all beings, including nature, is central (Baindur, 2021).

In Buddhist practice, learning occurs through immersion in texts, the teachings of Buddha, not through rote memorisation but through critical engagement and self-reflection (Baindur, 2021). Knowledge is constructed through students' perceptions and experiences as they interpret ultimate truths offered by the enlightened teacher (Hyland, 2013). Buddha himself was regarded as the ultimate teacher, adapting his guidance to each learner's level to help them progress toward the truth (Baindur, 2021) . In this sense, the student occupies the centre of the learning process, though the journey to enlightenment must ultimately be undertaken alone (Huxter, 2015).

From this discussion, the ultimate goal of both Hindu and Buddhist educational philosophies is inner peace and clarity of mind, culminating in *nirvana* or *moksha* (Baindur, 2021; Srivastava et al., 2013). Storytelling emerges as a common pedagogical technique in both traditions, used to teach ethics and morality to the wider public (Baindur, 2021). Stories provide a medium for engaging with ideas, reflecting on experiences, and contemplating moral choices (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021).

This discussion is important because education in Nepal is deeply tied to its cultural and philosophical roots, as in other South Asian countries (Baindur, 2021). Historically, Nepal's traditional education system was grounded in these religious philosophies (Parajuli, 2021b). encouraging critical thinking, self-reflection, and reasoning skills (Parajuli, 2021a).

Modern education, at least at the policy level, has largely marginalised these traditions (Parajuli, 2021a). However, their ongoing influence and tensions highlight the need to integrate these cultural and philosophical values into modern reform efforts. Additionally, it is important to recognise that the dominant Hindu worldview has historically been legitimised by state institutions (Onta, 2021). This has led to the marginalisation of alternative perspectives, such as those of the *Kirati* communities.

Kirati knowledge worldview

Pangha: "If the Pangha is broken, the wisdom is lost." True knowledge leads to living in balance with the visible (human) and the invisible (spiritual/natural) worlds. Losing wisdom means disrupting this harmony (e.g., through excessive greed or disrespect for nature).

Jong: "The greatest book is the elder's memory." Elders are the living libraries of the community. Respecting them is equivalent to respecting the knowledge they hold. Authentic learning means listening attentively to the elders' stories and advice.

These concepts, *Pangha and Jong*, reveal a different epistemology in which wisdom is maintained through harmony and relationships rather than being recorded in texts. However, such worldviews have been pushed aside in dominant reform discourses along with the *Bahun-Chettri* hegemony (Bista, 1991; Onta, 2021), reinforcing a single vision of progress and dismissing diverse ways of knowing (Onta, 2021; Onta, 1996b). This marginalisation is not abstract; it influences how teachers manage their roles and how students experience schooling.

Understanding the worldview through the Karmic cycle perspective

In *Chapter 1*, the karmic cycle metaphor was introduced. This section now describes the karmic cycle, which helps shape an important worldview in Nepali society across ethnicities, castes, and religions. Understanding this worldview is crucial because it provides a lens for interpreting Nepal's recurring patterns of education reform.

This concept is deeply rooted in Nepali philosophical and cultural worldviews. Within this framework, actions and consequences repeat until liberation is

achieved. Importantly, multiple karmic cycles coexist. They are not mutually exclusive but overlap and intersect at different points and in different ways. Each new plan seeks to address the implementation shortfalls of its predecessor. Metaphorically, breaking this cycle requires moving beyond structural fixes and ad hoc policy interventions. It calls for a deeper understanding of contextually aware approaches that consider the experiences, opinions, perceptions, and worldviews of both learners and teachers. This opens space to rethink what learning means in the Nepali context.

Basic principles of the karmic cycle

The karmic cycle offers a perspective on life and, by extension, education systems as interconnected and cyclical rather than linear. It progresses through four stages: *kriya* (action), the initial act driven by intention; *samskar* (imprint), the mark left by that act, which seeds future possibilities; *prarabdha* (manifestation), the present reality that is a consequence from past actions and cannot be avoided; and *phala* (fruit), the outcome that completes the cycle but also becomes the starting point for the next. These stages do not exist in isolation; they are embedded within three overlapping layers of *karma*: *sanchita* (the stored past), *prarabdha* (the present reality), and *kriyamaṇa* (the action now). Together, they clarify why nothing begins from zero and why patterns recur: each result carries forward as the next cause (see *Table 6*).

Table 6: Karmic cycle stages (Childs, 2004)

Karmic stage	Explanation
Kriya (Action)	This is the starting point—the act you do and the intention behind it. In life education? Or research, it is the moment of doing something with purpose.
Saṃskar (Imprint)	Every action leaves a mark. These impressions shape habits, thoughts, and future possibilities. They are not the final result but the seeds for what comes next.
Prarabdha (Manifestation)	This is what is happening now—the reality shaped by past actions. It is the part of the cycle that has ripened and cannot be avoided.
Phala (Fruit)	The outcome or result of what was done before. It completes the cycle but also starts a new one because every result becomes the next reality.

These stages illustrate how actions and consequences are interconnected, forming the basis of the karmic worldview.

This is nestled in the three layers of the karmic cycle presented in *Table 7*. These layers deepen the cyclical logic, showing how past, present, and future actions are entangled.

Table 7: Explanation of karmic cycle layers (Childs, 2004)

Karmic Layer	**Meaning**	**Explanation**
Sanchita Karma	The stored past	The accumulated store of all past actions and impressions that have not yet manifested.
Prarabdha Karma	The present reality	The portion of past actions that has ripened and is currently shaping present circumstances.
Kriyamaṇa Karma	The action now	The actions being performed now, which will influence future outcomes.

The karmic cycle metaphor threads through this thesis as a way of making sense of the recurring reforms. This cyclical logic mirrors Nepal's education reform trajectory. *Kriya* aligns with the launch of a new policy, often driven by global aspirations and donor agendas. *Saṃskar* appears in the immediate imprint of reform, policy documents, training programmes, and rhetoric that shape expectations. *Prarabdha* reflects the inherited classroom realities and systemic conditions that reforms cannot escape, from entrenched teaching practices to structural constraints. Finally, *phala* surfaces as partial implementation, unintended consequences, and symbolic compliance outcomes that then feed into the next cycle of reform. Deeper layers sustain these loops: the *sanchita karma* of past reforms and cultural logics, the *prarabdha karma* of current socio-political realities, and the *kriyamaṇa karma* of present policy choices. Each new reform, rather than breaking free, becomes entangled in these overlapping karmic cycles, reinforcing the disconnect between ambitious visions and the lived experiences of the classroom. A summary of the karmic stages and education reform is presented in *Table 8*.

Table 8: Karmic stages

Karmic stages	Reform stages	Karmic layers	Contextual landscape
Kriyā/Karma (Action):	The launch of a new reform, shaped by intent and global aspirations.	Saachita Karma	Accumulated legacies of past reforms, donor agendas, and cultural logics.
Saṃskara (Imprint):	The immediate imprint of policy: documents, training programmes, and rhetoric that shape expectations.	Prarabdha Karma	Current socio-political and structural conditions shaping reform enactment.
Prarabdha (Commencing):	The current reality of classrooms and systemic conditions that reforms inherit and cannot escape.	Kriyamaṇa Karma	Present choices — policy drafting, resource allocation, and implementation strategies.
Phala (Fruit):	The outcomes of reform: partial implementation, unintended effects, and symbolic compliance. These outcomes then become the starting point for the next cycle.		

This cyclical logic rejects a simple cause-and-effect model. The *phala* of one reform becomes the *prarabdha* of the next, creating a loop where each new policy seeks to fix the shortcomings of its predecessor without addressing deeper cultural and structural conditions. Breaking these cycles requires moving beyond symbolic compliance and engaging deeply with the lived experiences of teachers and learners, the everyday, granular realities documented in this study.

Connecting it all through a cultural development lens

Rogoff's cultural development lens (Rogoff, 1994, 2003, 2016; Rogoff et al., 1993) helps consolidate the paramount role of existing indigenous and local knowledge in shaping current teaching and learning practices.

Viewing human development as deeply influenced by cultural practices and beliefs (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003) also means recognising that these practices are fluid and continuously changing. Labelling individuals as culturally diverse can result in static representations of race and ethnicity that oversimplify the complexity of their contexts (ibid.). Culture shapes identity and cannot be

reduced to singular behaviours. Therefore, the focus must be on understanding cultural processes rather than cataloguing cultural content (Rogoff, 2003).

Subsequently, cultural contexts provide the foundation for learning and development (Rogoff, 2003). They influence how children learn, think, and experience the world (ibid.). Cognitive and social growth occur through active participation in cultural practices and engagement with everyday interactions. Guided participation, where a more knowledgeable person or peer scaffolds new ideas and understandings, anchors learning in these cultural contexts (Rogoff, 1994, 2016). This perspective, therefore, bridges the cultural foundations outlined in this chapter with the thesis framework.

Summary

This chapter situates the study within Nepal's complex policy environment as it grapples with structural inequalities shaped by caste and ethnic hierarchies, while seeking to align with global educational agendas, particularly LCE.

Analysis of the National Curriculum shows contradictions within Nepal's policies. Reform documents endorse LCE, yet the subject curriculum remains highly prescriptive and outcome oriented. This limits agency for teachers and learners and reflects policymakers' assumptions about knowledge.

The chapter also examines indigenous and local knowledge, which are fluid, contested, and grounded in lived experience. The karmic cycle metaphor helps explain why reform patterns recur and why policies fail to engage with deeper cultural and structural conditions.

Together, these discussions provide the foundation for analysing pedagogical practices in the rest of the thesis.

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

Building on the contextual foundations set out in *Chapter 2*, this chapter outlines the theoretical lenses used to examine how pedagogical practices persist and evolve in Nepali basic schools. These lenses enable the study to move from describing Nepal's complex cultural, historical, and policy landscape to analysing how these forces shape teaching–learning practices in classrooms. As discussed in *Chapter 2*, these pedagogical dynamics are inseparable from the global policy currents and deep-seated cultural logics that underpin Nepal's reform trajectory. Together, they form the analytical baseline for the framework that follows.

Understanding what pedagogy involves

This section operationalises and defines the parameters for what is meant by pedagogy in this study, as it underpins the findings and the policy reforms. This understanding is very important as it shapes and informs how this study interprets pedagogical practices and teaching-learning experiences within the Nepali context. As *Chapter 2* showed, such interpretations are deeply shaped by cultural and contextual conditions.

Therefore, pedagogy is an act that "encompasses the performance of teaching together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it. It is both an act and discourse" Alexander(2000, p. 540). In other words, it is the act of teaching together with the ideas, values, and beliefs by which the act of teaching is informed, sustained and justified (Alexander, 2008a).

These elements reflect the assumptions about pedagogy embedded in the current Nepali policy. Key documents such as the National Curriculum (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b), the Teachers' Code of Conduct (2000), the Education Act (1971b), and the School Education Sector Plan (SSEP) (MoEST, 2022) appear to be grounded in these specific understandings of pedagogy, even though they do not explicitly define it. Across these documents, they essentially assume that pedagogy is the act of teaching and learning that takes place inside the classroom (MoEST, 2021). This is evident in policy directives encouraging the use of creative and innovative pedagogical techniques that inspire children to be critical thinkers and move away from rote learning (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST,

2022). These policies also require teachers to shift away from their 'traditional' beliefs about how learning occurs, aiming instead for a focus on the holistic development of the child (MoEST, 2022). Teachers are expected to build relationships with students and collaborate closely with the community (MoEST, 2021, 2022). They are tasked with instilling democratic values and critical thinking to empower children to advocate for social justice (MoEST, 2022). Ultimately, teachers should help develop human resources through learner-centred education (LCE), contributing to the country's socio-economic progress (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; MoEST, 2022). Such policy requirements cannot be implemented through mere tweaks or replacements of current teaching methods, but require a fundamental paradigm shift in pedagogical approaches (Tabulawa, 1998, 2003). Therefore, pedagogy should be seen not just as teaching but as an embedded discourse that reflects underlying beliefs and values (Alexander, 2000). This highlights that pedagogy involves both technical aspects as well as the values and beliefs that shape it.

Exploring the pedagogic context

Since pedagogy is embedded within a wider context (Alexander, 2000; Schweisfurth, 2025b),it becomes important to be clear about what context means for this study. Understanding context is crucial because it shapes how pedagogical practices are enacted, negotiated, and interpreted by teachers and learners. Tabulawa (2003, 2013) has criticised LCE policies for being implemented in Low-Income Countries (LICs) without considering the cultural systems and the knowledge systems that shape and sustain them. This critique highlights that reforms such as LCE cannot be understood in isolation; they interact with cultural norms, historical legacies, and socio-political structures that influence classroom realities (Schweisfurth, 2013; Tabulawa, 2003).

Context is conceptualised in this study as a multi-layered and dynamic space (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018; Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024). It comprises political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions that intersect and influence educational practices (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018). Using this as a basis, context in this study refers to the space that is negotiated, shaped, and reshaped by shared human interaction (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023a). It is also equally influenced and shaped by its history, politics, and culture (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, 2018).

Schweisfurth (2013) draws on a combination of contexts that influence and interconnect educational practices in line with the adoption of LCE policies in LICs. These include political systems, economics, nationality, society, and culture Schweisfurth(2013, p. 38). Furthermore, contexts also consist of community, schools, health agencies, local authorities, and mass media (ibid.). Finally, context also includes family, peers, religious settings, and classrooms (ibid.).

Overall, these layers illustrate that contexts are interconnected yet often work against each other. They influence and shape experiences of learning, pedagogical practices, beliefs, perceptions, and worldviews (Thomas and Vavrus, 2024). This complexity is further captured in Brown and Schweisfurth's (2024) notion of space:

> *"space is therefore not a container with boundaries or a backdrop for social action but is produced by social action. Boundaries are porous, shaping factors are multiple and intertwined, reaching back in time and across local and global scales, and teachers and pupils contribute to and respond to these factors in different ways: this is social space."* Brown and Schweisfurth(2024, p. 474)

This conceptualisation of space as socially produced supports an inquiry into how contextual influences sustain or reshape pedagogical practices in Nepal. It assumes that pedagogical practices are neither enacted nor experienced in isolation. Instead, they are shaped through dynamic, relational interactions among teachers, learners, and the broader socio-cultural landscape (Alexander, 2000).

Considering alternative theoretical frameworks

Having established how pedagogy and context are conceptualised in this study, I undertook an initial review of several theoretical perspectives to identify which frameworks could best support the study's analytical aims. This exploratory stage was not intended to be exhaustive, rather it helped to identify approaches that would enable me to effectively organise and interpret the fluid, relational, and multi-layered nature of pedagogical practice.

Actor Network Theory (ANT) offered useful insights into relationality and dynamism (Lewis and Spratt, 2024), while Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

theory (Aubrey and Riley, 2022) helped foreground contextual layering. Tikly's concept of laminated learning highlighted the interplay of agency and structure (Tikly, 2015). However, they did not provide the broader contextual framing required to emphasise culturally grounded teaching-learning processes.

Together, these perspectives strengthened my understanding of the different dimensions shaping pedagogical practice: relational, contextual and structural. However, each offered only a partial lens, and none provided an integrated explanation of how these forces converge to shape the persistence of pedagogical practices over time. Therefore, this reflective process made me realise the need for a theoretical approach capable of encompassing structural continuity, relational dynamics, and the cultural logics underpinning pedagogical practice.

This understanding ultimately informed the adoption of the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019), complemented by Rappleye and Komatsu's (2017) onto-cultural perspective, as the most coherent theoretical lenses for this study. Together, these perspectives help explain how pedagogical patterns are stabilised over time and how cultural assumptions render them meaningful, aligning closely with the thesis's karmic cycle metaphor.

Dissecting the pedagogical nexus

This section justifies the use of the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) as a key theoretical lens for this study. Given this study's focus on understanding how pedagogical practices in Nepali basic schools are practised and sustained over time, the pedagogical nexus provides a useful framework for examining the persistence of certain teaching–learning practices. Hufton and Elliot (2000) developed the concept of the pedagogical nexus to explain why Russian students consistently demonstrated high motivation to learn, especially compared with children in the United Kingdom and the United States. They argued that this was a result of a stable and consistent set of mutually reinforcing influences embedded within the schooling system, rather than attributing this motivation to individual teacher quality or isolated interventions.

These stable factors included continuity in teacher–student relationships (with the same teacher often following a class for several years), intergenerational familiarity with the education system, strong home–school connections, early readiness for school, and a coherent curriculum aligned with textbooks, structured lessons, homework, assessments, and memorisation. While each of these elements were significant, their strength lay in their interaction, which formed a culturally embedded and predictable educational environment. The authors linked student motivation to the stability and consistency of these factors, many of which had persisted over time and become firmly embedded in the cultural fabric of schooling (Hufton and Elliott, 2000). These influences were often so embedded in everyday life that they became invisible, yet they played a crucial role in reinforcing and maintaining existing pedagogical practices.

Building on this foundation, Schweisfurth and Elliott (2019) extend the concept of the pedagogical nexus's nature by emphasising how educational practices are maintained through a web of relational, structural, and cultural factors, and how everyday expectations continually shape and reinforce one another. When reforms are implemented, they are recontextualised; they cannot replace the existing nexus. This makes the nexus highly resilient to one-dimensional interventions and helps explain why long-standing practices persist even under strong reform pressures. This highlights the importance of understanding how systemic and cultural conditions shape the adoption, interpretation, and endurance of pedagogical practices.

The pedagogical nexus enables a consideration of "the bigger picture of interrelated factors influencing the way pedagogies are enacted" (Bremner, 2021, p. 182). This perspective helps us understand how reform policies, such as LCE, are reiterated and reinterpreted to fit existing schemas and the logics of epistemological practices (Komatsu et al., 2021). It emphasises how the different ingredients work together to create a practice that fits the needs of the societal context rather than conforming to policy-level prescriptions of what works (Altinyelken and Sözeri, 2019). Together, this highlights the wider analytical value of the pedagogical nexus. It helps explain how systemic, relational and cultural forces stabilise pedagogical practices across diverse settings, showing why the framework is well-suited for examining the Nepali context.

This conceptualisation is particularly relevant to the Nepali context as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5. Education reforms in Nepal, including those promoting LCE, have often been shaped by global educational agendas and donor-driven priorities (Regmi, 2024), with limited attention to the lived realities of teachers and learners (Parajuli and Onta, 2021). These reforms tend to overlook the systemic, relational, and cultural factors that shape pedagogical practices on the ground. The pedagogical nexus provides a way to bring these strands together by offering a lens for examining how these factors interact and reinforce one another, thereby helping explain the persistence of 'traditional' practices despite repeated reform efforts.

Moreover, the pedagogical nexus aligns conceptually with the karmic cycle metaphor. Just as the karmic cycle captures the repetitive nature of policy reform and the tendency for reforms to circle back without transformative change, the pedagogical nexus helps to show how entrenched pedagogical practices are maintained through a complex interplay of historical, relational, and cultural forces. This alignment strengthens the study's theoretical grounding by offering a framework that accounts for both the structural and symbolic dimensions of pedagogical practices and continuity in Nepal.

Reflection on the application of the pedagogical nexus

The fact that the pedagogical nexus was developed inductively, based on a "set of linked and mutually reinforcing influences" on learners' motivation (Hufton and Elliott, 2000), is particularly compelling for the purposes of this study. This perspective offers a comprehensive understanding of how a combination of conditions reinforces and sustains pedagogical practices (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). It provides a lens to explore teaching–learning experiences as dynamic and evolving, yet deeply interconnected within broader contextual structures (Bowden et al., 2024). The pedagogical nexus shows how practices in schools, and the experiences of teachers and learners, are not linear but continually reinforced and embedded within their specific contexts (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). This continuity persisted despite radical social, economic, and political shifts in Russia (Hufton and Elliott, 2000). Therefore, the pedagogical nexus perspective will help explain why certain pedagogical practices persist and how they are sustained in the Nepali context.

Additionally, this approach aligns with the aim of documenting the day-to-day teaching and learning experiences of learners and teachers to understand what a contextualised pedagogical practice looks like in relation to LCE reform policies (if it relates at all). The pedagogical nexus lens enables exploration of "influences that are in the deep background of the schooling process and could pass unremarked, because invisible to observers and taken-for-granted by informants" Hufton and Elliott(2000, p. 117).

However, the pedagogical nexus was developed based on extensive research in Russia and reflects the authors' contextual insights (Hufton and Elliott, 2000). Such sustained longitudinal research is not easily available in the Nepali context. Many of the existing studies are often fragmented across different aspects of education (Pradhan, 2020b). This makes it necessary to approach the pedagogical nexus with caution to avoid overgeneralisation. While the framework provides a compelling explanation for learner motivation in the Russian context, it should not be assumed to function as a universal causal model (Hufton and Elliott, 2000).

Despite these drawbacks, a key strength of the pedagogical nexus is that it does not assume a fixed set of influences; rather, it emerged inductively from the study itself (Hufton and Elliott, 2000). The flexibility and openness of this approach is valuable for this study. Extended by Schweisfurth and Elliot (2019), it supports a holistic analysis of current pedagogical practices, the experiences and beliefs of both learners and teachers, and their embeddedness in the larger context in light of the LCE reforms over the years. This lens allows focused attention on educational practices and the intricacies that shape them.

The embeddedness of onto-cultural assumptions/contexts

While the pedagogical nexus explains how pedagogical practices are sustained through systemic and relational influences, it does not fully account for the deeper cultural and ontological assumptions. These assumptions shape how teachers and learners perceive and experience teaching and learning. To address this, the study draws on Rappleye and Komatsu's (2017) onto-cultural perspective. This perspective highlights how cultural logics and worldviews are embedded in educational practices. This lens helps the study explore how beliefs, values, and assumptions, including taken-for-granted ideas, actively

influence pedagogical practices. Subsequently, these may work against changing the practices and may lead to a rejection of externally imposed reforms such as LCE.

Their comparative study of Lesson Study in Japan and the United States demonstrates how pedagogical practices do not easily transfer across different contexts (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). In Japan, Lesson Study thrives because it aligns with a non-hierarchical, collaborative culture rooted in a worldview that regards knowledge as fluid, relational, and co-constructed. Teachers collaborate to identify problems, observe each other's lessons, and reflect collectively — practices embedded in broader societal norms of interdependence and continuous improvement (ibid). Conversely, in the American context Lesson Study faced difficulties through being shaped by individualism, expert-led knowledge transmission, and fixed ideas of 'best practice'. Teachers felt uncomfortable with peer feedback and perceived Lesson Study as a performance space rather than a collaborative learning process (ibid).

This illustrates how educational reforms are interpreted and enacted through culturally specific ontologies (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). The onto-cultural lens proves useful for this study, as it enables an exploration of how Nepali teachers' and learners' beliefs are shaped by local cultural logics and their interaction with LCE reforms. It allows me to move beyond superficial explanations of reform failures. Instead, this lens helps in the examination of how deeply rooted assumptions about knowledge, authority, and learning influence pedagogical practices. When used alongside the pedagogical nexus the onto-cultural perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of how and why certain practices persist or change in the Nepali context, particularly in light of broader policy ambitions and classroom realities. This perspective is inherently cyclical. Cultural logics shape pedagogical practices, and those practices in turn reproduce and reshape cultural assumptions over time. This dual dynamic aligns closely with the karmic cycle metaphor underpinning this study.

Reflection on the application of the onto-cultural perspective

Rappleye and Komatsu (2017) clearly illustrate how teachers' beliefs are shaped by their cultural contexts and are continuously reshaped through experience.

Their comparison of Japan and the US shows that when policies are borrowed, deeply embedded cultural logics shape how they are interpreted and enacted, often in ways that are not immediately visible. This idea is reflected in Brinkmann's (2019) study on LCE in India, which highlights how cultural tensions and mismatches between policy and teacher beliefs can hinder the implementation of reform. Notably, it clashed with teachers' beliefs, which were embedded in their cultural contexts and shaped their understanding of what learning and respect meant (Brinkmann, 2019). In essence, the values of LCE did not align with teachers' core beliefs (Sriprakash, 2010). Therefore, Rappleye and Komatsu's (2017) onto-cultural lens enabled exploration of the beliefs and assumptions that underpin pedagogical practices in the Nepali context.

However, if used in isolation, this perspective may lead to cultural determinism. It may lead to assuming that practice persists simply because beliefs do. It risks underestimating the material, institutional, and practical constraints that also shape what teachers can realistically do. It fails to recognise the influence of bureaucratic routines, resource shortages, policy incoherence, and everyday classroom pressures.

At an analytical level, the lens primarily focuses on interpretation. It offers limited insight into how those interpretations become stabilised or embedded. It therefore requires a structural partner to explain how cultural logics interact with, and are reinforced by, the wider schooling environment. Finally, because cultural assumptions are not uniformly held, the onto-cultural perspective can overlook internal diversity, tensions, and contested beliefs within a single context.

Although these limitations exist, the onto-cultural lens provides important insights into the core belief systems and meaning-making processes driving pedagogical practices. When combined with a structurally oriented framework, it enhances rather than limits the analysis. This helps develop a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural logics influence and are influenced by daily teaching and learning.

Integration of the theoretical lenses

The pedagogical nexus and the onto-cultural perspective offer valuable insights independently. However, to understand the persistence of pedagogical practices and the experiences of teachers and learners in Nepali schools, both are needed. The pedagogical nexus allows us to focus on and understand how systemic, relational, and institutional conditions reinforce one another to stabilise practice, thereby shaping pedagogy as it is enacted in everyday classroom life. In contrast, the onto-cultural perspective helps unpack the cultural and normative assumptions behind these practices. Both are essential for understanding current teaching–learning practices in depth.

Integrating the two lenses enables a holistic exploration of how the different ingredients in the teaching–learning processes become interconnected and resilient. These two lenses complement each other, enabling exploration of how practices can remain stable even amid successive reforms. It helps us understand why the system is not just resilient but actively reinforced through existing cultural logics and contextual realities. The integration of the two therefore allows pedagogical practices to be viewed in their cyclical nature.

Here, pedagogy is understood as both practice and discourse (Alexander, 2000), since practices are shaped and influenced by cultural assumptions, and practices in turn reproduce these cultural assumptions. This dynamic mirrors the karmic cycle metaphor . Just as the karmic cycle explains how actions, imprints, and consequences continually reinforce one another across time, the combined lenses help us understand how structural conditions (pedagogical nexus) and cultural logics (onto-cultural perspective) sustain and reassert pedagogical patterns across successive reform cycles.

Additionally, the use of the pedagogical nexus helps ensure that practices are not rationalised through an overly culturally deterministic lens, but accounts for the ongoing influence of structural elements. Meanwhile, the onto-cultural perspective emphasises the centrality of meaning-making in understanding pedagogical practices. This helps avoid a fixed view of practice. Their integration helps create space for a more critical, coherent, and contextually sensitive account of why these pedagogical practices persist, despite extensive reform efforts. and how these practices are reasserted across generations.

Summary

This chapter sets out the theoretical lenses used to examine teaching–learning processes in Nepali basic schools. The study recognises that pedagogy cannot be understood solely as a set of techniques, but as a practice shaped by cultural, relational, and contextual influences (Alexander, 2000).

Drawing on the pedagogical nexus, the study examines how pedagogical practices are sustained through the interplay of policy expectations, institutional arrangements, classroom routines, teacher–student relationships, and textbook use. In the Nepali context, this perspective highlights the conflicts teachers face among reform demands, their professional identities, classroom conditions, and learners' needs, as well as how LCE is understood and implemented in practice.

The analysis is complemented by the onto-cultural perspective, which draws attention to the beliefs and assumptions that shape how teaching and learning are understood. This perspective shifts the focus away from whether learner-centred approaches are simply present or absent, towards understanding how ideas about knowledge, authority, learning, and the beliefs inform teachers' and learners' engagements with pedagogical reform.

Used together, these lenses support an examination of how pedagogical practices are both stabilised and made meaningful within everyday classroom life. They provide a basis for interpreting the study's findings in relation to LCE as a negotiated and contextually embedded ideal, rather than a universally applicable model (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Chapter 4. The many faces of Learner-Centred Education: its appeal, discourses, critiques and conceptions

Building on the theoretical discussion in the previous chapter, this chapter turns to Learner-Centred Education (LCE), a global reform ideal that has travelled across contexts (Schweisfurth, 2013) and has become central to Nepal's educational reforms. LCE is not a neutral pedagogical reform (Tabulawa, 2003): it carries embedded assumptions about learning, the learner, and the purposes of schooling. It is often positioned as a solution to concerns about quality, equity, and democratic participation (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022).

This chapter examines LCE's conceptualisation, theoretical underpinnings, and discourses. It explores why LCE has become a common reform feature worldwide and in Nepal. It discusses how this aspiration drives multiple policy reforms at the same time. Metaphorically, these are karmic cycles aiming to 'fix' structural inequalities and quality issues. However, they often ignore deeper cultural and systemic logics.

The chapter is organised into three sections. The first section discusses the global appeal of LCE and its justifications (cognitive, emancipatory, and preparatory). The second section engages with the various discourses on the conceptions, feasibility, and applicability of LCE. The third section critically evaluates LCE models, ending with my rationale for using Schweisfurth's (2013) Minimum Standards (MS) as a conceptual framework. In doing so, the chapter begins to position pedagogy not as a fixed binary view of learner-centred versus teacher-centred approaches but as a flexible 'palette' of practices (Barrett, 2007), a concept further developed later in the discussion of LCE–Teacher-Centred Education (TCE) dichotomies and contextual adaptation.

The global appeal of LCE as an education policy reform

In Low-Income Countries (LIC), LCE reforms are championed by governments and donor and international organisations as a 'policy panacea' (Sriprakash, 2010). International Organisations (IOs) such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF, alongside national governments of LICs, including Nepal, advocate adopting LCE reforms to help realise global education goals, such as the SDGs, by focusing on the quality of education, in whole or in part (Song, 2015; Tabulawa, 2003). Additionally, to enhance quality, LCE is often positioned as an antidote to

teacher-centred, content-driven, rote-learning and high-stakes examination practices (Guthrie, 2017; Schweisfurth, 2013). Those practices are believed to encourage passive learning and reinforce unequal power dynamics between teachers and learners (Ho and Dimmock, 2023).

LCE reforms are often implemented on the basis of three main justifications: cognitive, emancipatory, and preparatory (Schweisfurth, 2013). These justifications are not mutually exclusive: they often overlap and morph into one another. This point is important because it deepens our understanding of the recurring reform patterns discussed earlier in *Chapter 2*, where ambitious policy contradicts social and contextual realities.

Proponents of LCE reforms differ in the justification they prioritise for pursuing these policies. Some emphasise the cognitive rationale for improving learning achievement, while others stress the emancipatory rationale for creating critical learning experiences that empower learners (Bremner et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2013). However, the effectiveness of LCE reform policies remains debated, as no definitive evidence supports their success (Sakata et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2011). As a result, these policies often become transient or travelling policies (Schweisfurth, 2011). Given its presence in the global education reform policy landscape and in Nepali policy, it is important to understand LCE and what it comprises. The three rationales are discussed below.

Cognitive justification

The cognitive justification for LCE rests on the belief that learning improves when learners actively construct knowledge rather than passively memorise content (MoE, 2016; MoEST, 2022). This principle draws on sociocultural theories that view learning as embedded in cultural and social contexts (Lave and Gomes, 2019; Rogoff, 2003).

At the core of this perspective is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This describes the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance from a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) (Aubrey and Riley, 2022). Bruner's concept of scaffolding complements this by emphasising temporary support, such as hints or task breakdowns, until learners internalise skills and work independently (Bruner, 2006). These supports must adapt to learners' needs, enabling a gradual

shift from socially mediated activity to autonomous problem-solving. This emphasis on problem-solving over rote memorisation reinforces LCE's commitment to preparing learners for participation in an evolving society (Aubrey and Riley, 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2010a, 2010b).

While Vygotsky and Bruner focus on cognitive processes, building on these foundations, Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning as engagement in a Community of Practice (CoP), in which beginners gradually move from casual involvement to central roles through Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Here, scaffolding and dialogue are not mere techniques but relational processes that embed learners in shared cultural practices (ibid). This transforms 'knowing about' into 'being' Lave and Wenger(1991, p. 29).

Rogoff deepens this perspective by framing learning as guided participation in culturally meaningful activities (Rogoff, 1994, 2003; Rogoff et al., 1993). Guidance is reciprocal and shaped by context, enabling learners to appropriate cultural tools through observation and active engagement (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003). This perspective reinforces the idea that cognitive development is inseparable from social interaction. Therefore, LCE assumes that active engagement, autonomy, and safety enhance learning (Schweisfurth, 2013). It also presumes that learners benefit when teaching builds on prior knowledge and fosters critical and creative thinking .

Emancipatory justification

Supporters of LCE reforms advocating from an emancipatory perspective argue that their value lies in emphasising how "particular models of pedagogies serve or undermine the freedoms of individuals and develop knowledge, skills and attitudes for democratic citizenship" Schweisfurth(2013, p. 27). Here, the focus is not only on what students learn but also on how learning transforms them and society (ibid). It is rooted in Dewey's work, which highlights the importance of fostering democratic values in learning to help individuals become adaptable and capable of promoting and practising democracy (Van der Ploeg, 2016). Consequently, LCE is believed to have the potential to empower and emancipate learners (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Proponents of LCE, drawing on an emancipatory justification, argue that education perpetuates structural inequalities and the status quo across class

structures (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, 2002). This occurs primarily by aligning the social relations of schooling with the requirements of the capitalist workforce (Bowles and Gintis, 2002). Education also reinforces class differentiation among children by covertly rewarding cultural capital, that is, the specific knowledge, linguistic styles, and tastes inherited by dominant classes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). These mechanisms produce differential achievement that appears to be based on individual merit rather than social background, effectively concealing the initial advantage.

Taken together, these structural and cultural processes operate as key components in maintaining the ruling class's dominance through cultural hegemony and in legitimising the social order and inequality (Gramsci, 1971). Therefore, LCE has the potential to question and critically engage with these structures. At the pedagogical level this is partly possible because LCE is situated within democratic social interaction. Danforth (2015), Hopkins (Hopkins, 2018), and Howlett (2013) argue that learners, despite their differences, should share experiences in communal environments, fostering habits of collaboration and adaptability essential for democratic life.

Freire's work deepens this emancipatory vision by critiquing how traditional 'banking' pedagogies sustain inequality and by proposing dialogic alternatives central to LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013). Freire criticised the 'banking education system' for perpetuating inequality by making learning a passive process (Darder, 2017). This system assumes learners are 'deficient' entities to whom teachers merely transfer knowledge to make them 'knowledgeable' Darder(2017, p. 108). Learners are expected to reproduce content passively rather than to engage with it critically. By enforcing this passivity, the banking system becomes a mechanism for maintaining ruling-class dominance through cultural hegemony, legitimising social order and inequality (Freire, 1996; Gramsci, 1971). To counter this exploitative model, Freire proposed active learner involvement in co-constructing knowledge through problem-posing dialogue (Freire, 1996), a principle central to LCE (Thomas and Schweisfurth, 2021).

Freire (1996) argued that meaningful learning requires an egalitarian teacher–learner relationship, achieved through extensive dialogue . This process is

central to emancipation, enabling both parties to co-create culturally relevant communication tools (Darder, 2017) and deepen their understanding of socio-cultural and political contexts. Through mutual reflection, teachers are challenged to change the status quo while learners develop critical awareness and actively engage with existing power structures (Freire, 1996). This mutual reflection and co-decision-making about pedagogy facilitates the deep, meaningful learning that Freire deemed the ultimate goal of education. This emancipatory rationale is further championed by shared principles of LCE. This is articulated in the work of the United Nations and IOs, including the UNCRC, to which almost all countries are signatories (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Extending this emancipatory orientation, rights-based education has become a central component of LCE, rooted in the idea that human development is multidimensional (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). Its goal is to embed human rights principles in society (Bajaj and Kidwai, 2016), with a focus on securing the right to education for all children. LCE serves as an educational tool to promote "rights to education, rights in education, and rights through education" (Tikly and Barrett(2011, p.5). It aims for all schools to provide a healthy, safe, protective, and gender-sensitive environment (Bajaj, 2012; Bajaj and Kidwai, 2016). This includes protecting children from physical, mental, and emotional harm (Bajaj, 2012). For example, the widespread use of corporal punishment in many low-income countries is increasingly being challenged (Le and Nguyen, 2019). However, further research is needed to understand how and why this punishment is administered within specific social and cultural contexts.

The rights-based approach also promotes respect for cultural, linguistic, social, and ethnic diversity (Bajaj and Mabona, 2021). Additionally, it encourages learners to engage actively in their education and to embrace democratic values (Robinson, 2017). However, it is also important to note that democratic values themselves require critical examination by unpacking their meaning. Overall, implementing rights-based education aims to make schools more inclusive, relevant, and democratic (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). But we must also remember that these notions, including the UNCRC, assume that all children experience the same thing in the same incremental order (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a). The study partially explores how human rights are interpreted and enacted at the classroom level, focusing on the beliefs of teachers and learners within their

specific contexts, since the success of LCE in empowering learners and securing human rights has been mixed (Sakata et al., 2022).

Preparatory justification

Some advocates for LCE reform cite its preparatory narrative as a key justification for its adoption (Schweisfurth, 2013). They argue that LCE prepares children for the demands of an uncertain future (ibid). This justification draws on philosophical principles rooted in postmodern thought and also considers economic perspectives (ibid). From a postmodern perspective, the contemporary world is marked by uncertainty, fluidity, impermanence, and rapid change (Best, 2020). In this context, LCE is believed to equip learners to navigate "liquid modernity" (Best, 2020) by fostering the skills needed to adapt, as there is no longer room for the transmission of "fixed bodies of knowledge" (Schweisfurth, 2013). Advocates, therefore, argue that LCE enables learners to remain receptive to new ideas and forms of knowledge (Schweisfurth, 2013).

The second argument relates to the shifting global economy (Verger et al., 2018b), which increasingly values knowledge and innovation over material production. This economic landscape demands competencies such as flexibility, metacognition, research, creativity, and critical thinking skills that proponents believe are best developed through LCE to maintain economic competitiveness (Schweisfurth, 2013). These priorities are reflected in Nepali policy frameworks, as outlined in *Chapter 2*. However, as with other narratives surrounding LCE, there is no conclusive evidence supporting these claims (Bremner, 2021). Moreover, the benefits of the knowledge economy are unevenly distributed, raising questions about who ultimately gains from such reforms and highlighting ongoing political struggles over what counts as 'valuable skills' and how one can reliably anticipate future needs (Schweisfurth, 2013).

These three rationales, cognitive, emancipatory, and preparatory, illustrate why LCE has become a globally appealing reform ideal. They also highlight its inherently contested nature. Each justification carries assumptions about learning, development, and societal progress that may not align with diverse cultural and contextual realities. These tensions underpin the conceptual complexities of LCE. The following section, therefore, examines how LCE is

theorised, interpreted, and debated across contexts, and why its implementation and definition remain fluid and challenging.

LCE conceptual complexities and perspectives

Critiquing LCE reforms and the imposition of Western ideology

Tabulawa (2003) argues that LCE is not a neutral reform. Rather, it is an economic, political, and ideological tool used by Western nations to perpetuate the neoliberal agenda through IOs (Tabulawa, 2003, 2013). He critiques the tendency to attribute the failure of LCE reforms simplistically to resource shortages or inadequate teacher expertise, noting that this overlooks the fact that "pedagogic(al) innovations are social constructions and as such are value-laden" (Tabulawa, 2013, p. 16). From this perspective, institutions exert more influence on policy implementation than policies do on institutions (Tabulawa, 2013). This view also highlights one dimension of the broader pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019), in which institutional, political, and cultural forces interact to shape how pedagogical reforms are interpreted and enacted.

This critique aligns with broader concerns about how global models interact with local educational realities. Schweisfurth (2013) emphasises that the success of LCE reforms depends heavily on context, shaped by interactions between global and local actors. However, reforms are often introduced without sufficient understanding of their implications, leading to significant challenges. When teachers lack clarity, experience, or practice, implementation can be worse than traditional approaches:

> *"Lack of understanding, lack of experience or lack of practice are no better than, can certainly be worse than, well-worn TCE....LCE badly implemented is worse than a simple waste of policy hot air and training resources. It can facilitate unproductive chaos and constant testing and relaying of boundaries by learners and teachers, and time wasted by teachers on tasks which fill classroom hours but lead to no, or negative learning"* (Schweisfurth, 2013, p.137).

This highlights how poorly contextualised reforms can unintentionally produce practices that undermine learning rather than enhance it. Further compounding

these issues, LCE policies are often drafted in inaccessible language and lack clear dissemination plans (Guthrie et al., 2015). Poor-quality teacher training exacerbates the problem, with trainers themselves sometimes unable to demonstrate LCE in practice (Mtika and Gates, 2010). Teacher motivation also plays a critical role, yet teachers frequently face conflicting expectations, such as implementing reforms while ensuring students succeed in high-stakes examinations (Bremner et al., 2025). This dynamic creates a cyclical blame game between policymakers and teachers, contributing to what Schweisfurth (2011, p.425) describes as a history of "failure, grand and small".

Ultimately, these patterns show that LCE reform implementation challenges are rooted in underlying conceptual and contextual tensions rather than a simplistic practice-policy gap. It is about finding solutions or approaches that address complex contextual realities. Depending on how it is conceptualised, various discourses surround its feasibility and applicability. This will be discussed below.

The epistemic misalignment of LCE with cultural contexts

The issue is not merely about the implementation challenges of LCE education or the epistemic misalignment of LCE with cultural contexts. Gerard Guthrie (2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018) and Richard Tabulawa (1997, 1998, 2003, 2013; 2009) argue that LCE reforms conflict with core epistemic beliefs about the nature of knowledge, particularly in LICs. While LCE assumes that knowledge is co-constructed in the classroom, in practice it is often viewed as objectivist and transferred from teacher to learner (Tabulawa, 2013). Tabulawa (2013) states that Botswana's teachers hold objectivist epistemologies; they believe knowledge is detached from human subjectivity and is "constituted, maintained, and transformed" (p. 5). Consequently, knowledge is seen as something to be discovered, not constructed (Tabulawa, 2013; Tabulawa, 2009). Similarly, teachers tend to perceive reality as static and unchanging, existing independently of the learner, thus making it objective (Tabulawa, 1998, 2013).

However, Schweisfurth (2025b) challenges this one-dimensional view. She argues that LCE is multilayered, encompassing pedagogical techniques, relationships, assessments, and learning processes. Therefore, its implementation cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy, especially in complex contexts where policy transfer is not straightforward. Pedagogical models are shaped by contextual

realities, making nuanced adaptation essential (Schweisfurth, 2025b). Vavrus and Bartlett (2013b) add that epistemologies are not solely shaped by culture but are also situationally reshaped by structural factors such as class size, time constraints, curriculum, and exam regimes. These conditions often limit the feasibility of adopting LCE fully. Such tensions suggest that rigid or universal definitions of LCE are insufficient, highlighting the need for more flexible, context-sensitive conceptualisations (Bremner, 2021). Rather than importing the entire model, this approach enables pragmatic, context-sensitive adaptation of LCE principles (Bremner, 2021). This reflects how deeper onto-cultural assumptions about knowledge and learning (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) shape how teachers interpret and respond to LCE reforms.

Cultural values of respect, hierarchy and classroom order

This epistemic misalignment influences both knowledge and classroom relationships. In many low-income countries, teachers are rooted in their cultural contexts, where they both shape and are shaped by them simultaneously (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). Both Guthrie (2011, 2018) and Tabulawa (1998, 2013) argue that many of the LICs' cultural norms value hierarchy, authority, and respect. Consequently, according to them, LCE reforms challenge assumptions about obedience, respect, classroom order, and silence. Tabulawa (2013) elaborates further, arguing that there is a clear separation between learners and teachers, with teachers holding more power and authority over children. This is also embedded in Batswana culture, where hierarchy and respect are fundamental to society (Tabulawa, 2013). This partly stems from societal habits and thoughts that shape worldviews and influence how people interact (Tabulawa, 2013). Additionally, pedagogical styles play a key role in shaping and moulding desirable behaviours and thought patterns, legitimising and reinforcing social order (Tabulawa, 2013, p. 105).

Guthrie (2018) and Tabulawa (2013) argue that hierarchy, authority, and respect are culturally embedded and central to classroom dynamics in many low-income countries; this perspective risks essentialising culture and overlooking its complexity (Guthrie et al., 2015). Guthrie (2011), in particular, presents formalism as a coherent and functional system. He suggests practices such as public shaming are culturally appropriate and effective for maintaining order,

referring to this as "benevolent paternalism" (Guthrie, 2011, p. 4). He (Guthrie, 2011) implies that culturally embedded practices are inherently valid. However, this is not necessarily the case. Such a view neglects critical engagement with the ethical implications of these practices and how cultures are continuously evolving (Bartlett and Mogusu, 2013), as well as their impact on learners' well-being and agency (Sakata, 2023). Moreover, little consideration appears to be given to how children genuinely feel about these practices (Brown, 2022; Sakata, 2019). Guthrie (2011, 2013) also promotes a narrow view of learning, emphasising formal skills in numeracy and literacy assessed through examinations. However, Sarangapani(2016) rightly points out that rote and exam-oriented learning are insufficient for children's overall development and growth.

Compared with Guthrie (2011, 2013), Tabulawa (2013) offers a more nuanced perspective by recognising that learners exercise agency within these structures. He notes that silence, often seen as passivity, can be a form of resistance or negotiation. This challenges the notion that classroom authority is unidirectional and suggests that pedagogical relationships are more dynamic than Guthrie suggests. He also acknowledges how classroom culture is actively shaped and received (Tabulawa, 1998). He points out that children judge teachers based on perceived competence rather than mere obedience (Tabulawa, 1998; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2013a). However, pedagogical practices are continuously negotiated and contextualised (Schweisfurth, 2013; Vavrus et al., 2013). Therefore, it is vital to move beyond the rigid dichotomy of LCE and Teacher-Centred Education (TCE) of formalistic traditions. To understand this more clearly, it becomes important to reconsider what 'formalism' itself represents in these debates and how it continues to be portrayed.

Reconsidering formalism as a culturally situated practice

Guthrie (2017) and Tabulawa (2013) question the portrayal of formalism as outdated or ineffective. Both authors argue that the formalistic and teacher-centred pedagogies are often the most culturally and contextually appropriate in many LICs . Guthrie (2017) argues that formalist practices remain embedded in school systems because they reflect broader cultural and traditional norms. Therefore, formalism should not be viewed as an obstruction or a mere

transitional stage requiring 'fixing' (Guthrie, 2011). Tabulawa (2003) emphasises that formalism is a culturally embedded practice that is constantly negotiated in classroom settings. He emphasises the need to move away from deficit narratives that frame cultures and countries as less evolved because of their use of formalism (Tabulawa, 2003, 2013). He contends that LCE requires a fundamental change in teachers' beliefs because it frequently clashes with the core values of many of these countries (Tabulawa, 2003). This tension results in 'tissue rejection', in which LCE reforms fail to take root (Tabulawa, 2013).

Even though Guthrie (2017) and Tabulawa (2013) argue that formalism is culturally coherent and contextually appropriate in many low-income countries, this position risks oversimplifying the dynamic nature of culture and pedagogy (Vavrus, 2009). This deterministic view overlooks the fact that societies and educational practices are constantly evolving and influenced by multiple factors, including globalisation (Bartlett and Mogusu, 2013). Local contexts comprise a multitude of variables, from political climate to teaching culture (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021), that influence how LCE reform agendas are accepted (or not) (Schweisfurth, 2013). Consequently, the cultural landscape where LCE reforms occur is dynamic and ever-changing (Schweisfurth, 2013). As a result, global travelling policies such as LCE rarely remain intact; they are transformed into new entities within local contexts (Bermeo et al., 2013).

Beyond learner-centred education and teacher-centred education towards a palette of practices

Expanding on the earlier discussion of culturally situated formalism, it becomes evident that many challenges related to LCE reforms stem more from how pedagogical approaches are conceptualised rather than from the specific techniques used. Often, LCE is implemented through simplistic methods that overlook the fact that such reforms require time and should be approached holistically rather than through isolated, one-time solutions. O'Sullivan (2004) emphasises the importance of moving beyond the binary view of learner-centred versus teacher-centred approaches, promoting a 'learning-centred' perspective instead.

Although Tabulawa (2013) is critical of LCE reform policies, he recognises that classroom practices and experiences are co-constructed, with both teachers and

students actively shaping how learning occurs. This creates space for negotiation and interaction, acknowledging that learning does not always follow a single cultural pattern. Rigid, narrow interpretations of LCE (Tabulawa, 2013) overlook this fluidity and fail to engage with culturally relevant possibilities for learner participation.

To move beyond these limited binaries, Barrett (2007) suggests conceptualising pedagogy as a 'palette' of methods that teachers can draw from in contextually responsive ways. This metaphor reframes teaching as a dynamic, adaptive practice rather than one bound to fixed categories. Such a perspective enables greater alignment with changing cultural and institutional realities (Schweisfurth, 2013) and supports more nuanced engagements with LCE.

This study contributes to this discourse by exploring how teachers and learners negotiate the meaning of learning within their specific contexts. By examining how these negotiations shape local understandings of pedagogy, the study seeks to identify the everyday realities of Nepali classrooms.

Various models associated with LCE

The previous sections presented the major conceptual debates surrounding LCE, including its rationales, critiques, and cultural or contextual tensions. Building on this foundation, the following section reviews several models developed to operationalise LCE and to clarify what LCE might look like in different educational contexts.

Table 9 summarises these various LCE conceptualisations. This table presents my analysis of how they are discussed in the literature. The table is then followed by a detailed discussion of each item.

Table 9: Overview of different LCE/SCE models

Model	Key Features	Strengths	Weaknesses
Teaching Styles Model (Guthrie, 2011)	Focuses primarily on classroom teaching; positions the teacher as the most influential variable.	Simple and easy to understand; useful for analysing classroom practices.	One-dimensional; places excessive emphasis on teachers while overlooking systemic and relational factors.
Minimum Standards for LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013)	Establishes a flexible continuum of minimum standards for contextualised	Adaptable to local contexts; applicable at both policy and practitioner levels;	Requires time and effort to interpret; language can be vague, leading to

Model	Key Features	Strengths	Weaknesses
	LCE; considers all aspects of learning.	promotes clarity on what LCE entails.	potential misinterpretation.
Student-Centred Education Framework (Starkey, 2019)	Integrates three dimensions, agentic, humanist, and cognitive, within a fluid, overlapping structure.	Offers a holistic representation of student-centred learning; accommodates diverse priorities.	Technical and theory-heavy; challenging to operationalise without prior conceptual understanding.
Flexible LCE/SCE Framework (Bremner, 2021)	Provides two options (six-point and ten-point frameworks) for defining LCE/SCE; emphasises adaptability.	Highly flexible; allows practitioners to select relevant aspects for their context.	Dual frameworks can create confusion; requires theoretical grounding to apply effectively.

Guthrie's teaching styles model

Guthrie's (2011) Teaching Styles Model is specifically focused on classroom teaching and proposes an ordinal scale, which is presented below in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2: Teaching Styles Model (Guthrie, 2011, p. 205)

Variables	Authoritarian	Formalistic	Flexible	Liberal	Democratic
Teacher Role (Authoritarian to democratic)	Formal and domineering, Imposing rigid norms and sanctions.	Formal with well-established routines and strict hierarchical control.	Uses variety in methods and some relaxation of controls, but still dominant.	Actively promotes student-centred classroom. Encourages pupil participation in decisions.	Leader of democratically based group. Coordinator of activities.
Student Role (passive to active)	Passive recipient of teacher-defined roles in behaviour and learning. Little overt interaction.	Passive, although some overt interaction.	More active role within constraints defined by the teacher.	Work within fairly wide boundaries, especially in learning decisions.	Actively participates in decisions. Increasingly responsible for own decisions.
Content Approach (teaching to learning)	Teaching of a prescriptive syllabus with closely defined content for rote learning.	Organised processing of syllabus with emphasis on memorisation.	Some flexibility in use of syllabus and textbooks, with attention to learning problems.	Wide degree of curricular choice. Emphasis on learning processes rather than content.	Strong emphasis on student learning at individual pace. Teacher as a resource.
Reinforcement (negative to positive)	Struct teacher control with strong negative sanctions (e.g. corporal punishment, enforcing obedience	Strong teacher-based negative sanctions, especially focused on learning.	Greater attempts to use positive reinforcement backed by strong negative sanctions.	Increased effort on positive reinforcement.	Positive response to internal motivation, although with latent authority.

Guthrie (2011) argues that his model "removes Western education as a basis for predicting direction of change" (p. 204), challenging the notion that Western pedagogical frameworks are universally applicable or desirable. For him, teachers are central to shaping classroom learning and culture. He describes the model as "purely nominal", asserting that no teaching style is inherently superior or inferior. This perspective invites a critical examination of biases embedded in educational paradigms. While Guthrie acknowledges the model's simplicity, he suggests it offers useful insights for classroom research across diverse contexts, addressing the complexities of global pedagogical practices.

Guthrie emphasises that the categories in his model are not exhaustive and encourages additions or redefinitions. This is indicated by the dotted lines in the figure. The assumption is that teaching practices are fluid rather than static, allowing teachers to move across a spectrum of approaches. However, by positioning the model as simplistic and easy for practitioners to apply, he risks underestimating the nuanced challenges teachers face in diverse environments (Bremner et al., 2022).

Guthrie's teaching styles (2011) provide a framework for reflecting on pedagogical methods. The Authoritarian style is characterised by strict discipline, rote memorisation, and minimal student interaction. The Formalistic style maintains rigidity but permits limited participation within controlled boundaries. The Flexible style integrates approaches, enabling greater adaptability and student engagement. The Liberal style promotes student-led learning and decision-making, while the Democratic style positions teachers as facilitators who support learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Reflecting on these styles, Guthrie's model is valuable for prompting self-reflection on my own practices. However, there is a paradox in his association of liberal and democratic styles, which resembles the essence of a contextualised LCE, despite his criticism of LCE as being culturally inappropriate (Guthrie, 2018). Moreover, his claim that teachers alone determine learning outcomes oversimplifies the complexities of educational dynamics (Sakata et al., 2022; Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021). Teaching must be understood within a broader, evolving context shaped by multiple actors and institutional frameworks (Vavrus, 2009).

Bremner's flexible LCE/SCE framework

While Guthrie (2011) questions the applicability of LCE in practice, Bremner (2021) argues for a more flexible conception of LCE/student-centredness. This approach allows individuals to select aspects most relevant to their context and apply them in practice (Bremner, 2021). To support this, he draws on a meta-analysis of 326 journal articles (Bremner, 2021). Bremner proposes two options, a six-point framework or a ten-point framework, for defining LCE/student-centred education. He describes this as a "practical way of reconciling the numerous ways in which the term has been interpreted, whilst not being so all-

encompassing to be unmanageable" (Bremner, 2021, p. 181). Such flexibility, he argues, enables those working with learner-centred practices to compare approaches and work towards finding valid conclusions across contexts.

Figure 3 shows the six-point and ten-point framework that Bremner (2021) proposes, illustrating his attempt to create a flexible yet structured definition of LCE/SCE.

Figure 3: Flexible LCE/SCE model (Bremner, 2021)

A 10-aspect framework for defining SCE/LCE	**A 6-aspect framework for defining SCE/LCE**
1. Active participation 2. Interaction 3. Real-life skills 4. Higher order skills 5. Adapting to needs 6. Power sharing 7. Autonomy 8. Metacognition 9. Formative assessment 10. Humanistic role	1. Active participation (including interaction) 2. Relevant skills (real-life and higher order skills) 3. Adapting to needs (including human needs) 4. Power sharing 5. Autonomy (including metacognition) 6. Formative assessment

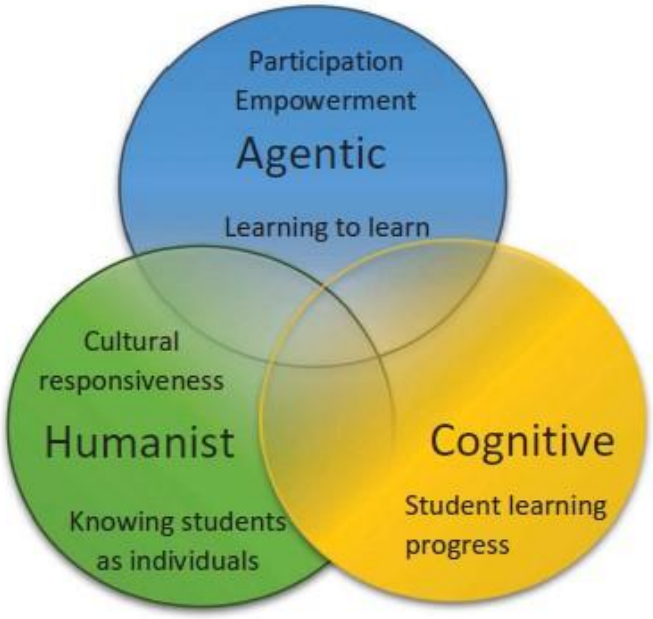
Bremner (2021) presents compelling arguments for making LCE/SCE more pragmatic and practical so that practitioners can use it in classrooms. His emphasis on teacher agency and autonomy, allowing teachers to choose aspects they can realistically apply, is persuasive (Bremner, 2021). However, the two frameworks may also create confusion. Bremner (2021) acknowledges this and notes that the framework could be seen as reductionist, as it does not fully recognise the complexity of context or its position within the larger pedagogical nexus.

Although Bremner (Bremner, 2021) critiques Schweisfurth (2013) for presenting two versions of LCE, he offers two frameworks of his own, highlighting the difficulty of defining LCE in a single, fixed way.

Starkey's student-centred framework

Starkey (2019) argues that student-centred education cannot simply be defined in opposition to teacher-centred education. He developed a framework representing three dimensions within which the broader student-centred approach operates. The conceptual framework is shown in *Figure 4*.

Figure 4: Student-centred education conceptual framework (Starkey, 2019)



Starkey (2019) explains that the interaction among the three dimensions depends on individual contexts, where certain dimensions may be prioritised over others, but all work together harmoniously, with fluid boundaries (Starkey, 2019). The framework comprises three highly interdependent dimensions.

The *Agentic Dimensio*n emphasises empowering learners to become active participants in the learning process, school life, and decisions affecting them (Starkey, 2019). This involves encouraging students to critically reflect on social practices, address problems creatively, and engage through collaborative, discovery-based, and problem-based learning. It is crucial that this learning is inclusive across all social strata and abilities (Starkey, 2019).

The *Humanist Dimension* stresses the importance of truly knowing individual learners and their specific contexts (Starkey, 2019). The focus is on understanding their unique strengths, weaknesses, creativity, perceptions, opinions, interests, and needs, and designing learning approaches accordingly. This includes "teaching approaches (that) include seeing the student holistically, building self-confidence and self-belief and empowerment" (Tangney, 2014, p. 273).

Finally, the *Cognitive Dimension* is underpinned by the idea that individual students construct knowledge while learning. The emphasis is on optimising

individual learning and achievement by tailoring lessons to meet learners' needs, enabling them to build effectively on existing knowledge (Starkey, 2019). These concepts are also reflected in Bremner's (2021) flexible framework of LCE/SCE.

Starkey's model is valuable because it provides a fluid conceptualisation of how different aspects interact and shape one another, while keeping the focus on the child. However, this fluidity between the three concepts makes it difficult to operationalise and implement in practice (Bremner, 2021). Moreover, it does not consider context or address the various structures and influences at play (Vavrus, 2009).

Minimum Standards of learner-centred education

The increasing demand to account for contextual complexities (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018; Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024) in implementing LCE reforms underscores that the goal should not be merely to adapt LCE to existing education systems. Instead, the focus should be on fundamentally reforming and strengthening the education system to become truly "learning centred" (O'Sullivan, 2004). This strategy aims to foster the growth and development of children. It views pedagogical practices as a spectrum of approaches, similar to a palette of practices (Barrett, 2007).

This adaptable perspective is offered by Schweisfurth's (2013) Minimum Standards (MS) of LCE. The model helps "depolarise pedagogy" and allows for the deeply fluid contextual factors to be accounted for in pedagogical practices (Schweisfurth, 2013). The focus needs to be on the failure of implementation of LCE, but to be able to adjust and adapt to different cultural contexts (Schweisfurth, 2013). It can be "shaped to fit capacity, local cultures and national goals" (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 143). This study aims to identify local practices and belief systems that may enhance our understanding of teaching and learning in Nepali classrooms.

Building on the above-discussed principles, Schweisfurth (2013) proposes a set of MS for LCE. These are broad categories that align with the fundamental principles of LCE while giving practitioners space to adapt and implement a model that addresses their own cultural contexts and students' needs. The Minimum Standards are presented in ***Figure 5***.

Figure 5: Minimum Standards for learner-centred education Schweisfurth (2013, p. 145-149)

Minimum Standard	**Open to interpretation**
1.Lessons are engaging to pupils, motivating them to learn.	Lessons are to engage and motivate students to learn, using any pedagogy or teaching technique that is deemed fit.
2. Atmosphere and conduct reflect mutual respect between teachers and pupils. Conduct such as punishment and the nature of relationships do not violate rights.	A classroom culture that encourages teachers and students to build personal relationships with each other as well as themselves based on mutual respect and trust. (The nature of these relationships will be contextual.) All interactions, including administering punishment, must not violate any of the fundamental rights.
3.Learning challenges build on learners' existing knowledge.	The origins, level and nature of the existing knowledge. The extent to which the understanding of existing knowledge refers to the knowledge of individuals or the class collective. How far information technology supports this.
4.Dialogue is used (not only transmission) in teaching and learning.	The precise amount of dialogue, how it fits into the lesson, its qualitative nature and tone, and who the dialogue is between (e.g., teacher-learner; learner-learner). Lessons employ dialogue which is not limited to transmission. Students engage in learning through this. The tone, the process and the style will differ according to context.
5. Curriculum is relevant to learners' lives and perceived future needs, in a language accessible to them (mother tongue except where practically impossible).	Precise content and nature of learning materials. How far these are nationalised through a curricular framework, or localised and set by teachers and/or students. The role of technology. How individualistically this is interpreted. The curriculum must be relatable and relevant to the lives of the learners and for their future. Lessons must be conducted in accessible language; use of mother tongue is encouraged where appropriate. Teachers need to manage the conflict that may arise in terms of what is relevant at a global, national and local level and work through this.
6.Curriculum is based on skills and attitude outcomes as well as content. These should include skills of critical and creative thinking.	As above, regarding setting of the curriculum. The local 'flavour' of critical thinking, and the communication conventions used to express or resolve points of disagreement.

Minimum Standard	**Open to interpretation**
7.Assessment follows up these principles by testing skills and by allowing for individual differences. It is not purely content-driven, or success based only on rote learning.	Who sets assessment tasks, and the balance of centralised and local testing. Assessments need to test a variety of skills that students develop and should not be solely content-driven or seek answers produced through rote learning. However, the assessment's form can be decided by the practitioners (including written examinations).

The MS offers a holistic framework for understanding pedagogical practices, as it encompasses all aspects of teaching and learning, including the contexts. Schweisfurth (2013) emphasises the importance of using the Minimum Standard as a starting point for policymakers and practitioners to reflect on, engage with, and adapt to local content and education, considering how the principles can be tailored to local contexts and demands. Furthermore, she (Schweisfurth, 2013) is optimistic that MS can help address the mismatch between local culture or schooling realities and the expectations of LCE as currently conceived.

However, engaging with these MS still requires a basic understanding and conceptualisation of LCE. The inherent flexibility of the standards can pose an issue, as the language remains vague, making it difficult to operationalise (Neumann, 2013). Achieving this requires time and effort to genuinely reflect on local practices (Neumann, 2013). While this flexibility is a strength of the model, it can also be a drawback, potentially causing confusion among practitioners and policymakers, as conflicting interpretations of the Minimum Standards may arise (Bremner, 2021; Starkey, 2019). Essentially, if LCE is left open to interpretation, internal conflict and power struggles could emerge within the country, influenced by local contexts and contested versions of these standards.

Another critical question is whether we assume that LCE is realised only when all seven standards are localised; this assumption could limit its feasibility and applicability. Such an approach would undermine the model's entire purpose, which is to broaden its scope and view it along a spectrum rather than within narrow parameters. Furthermore, can we consider a system where only certain aspects of the MS are locally contextualised as LCE?

Therefore, Schweisfurth's MS offer a flexible yet challenging framework for contextualising LCE. While they provide a starting point for reflection and

adaptation, their inherent ambiguity demands careful interpretation to avoid superficial or fragmented implementation.

Overall reflection on conceptualising LCE

Debates about what constitutes LCE, its theorisations, and its applicability are extensive and often circular, as its definition remains contested. Many authors (Barrett, 2007; Sakata et al., 2022; Vavrus, 2021) emphasise that contextual and cultural realities shape how such a 'well-travelled policy' is implemented. Yet these discussions remain largely adult-centred, with children's voices and experiences notably absent (Brown, 2025; Sakata, 2023), positioning them as recipients rather than participants in pedagogical reform.

This study addresses this gap by foregrounding children's perspectives alongside teachers' experiences. Nepal, like other LICs, has pursued LCE reforms in repeated 'karmic cycles' (Bhatta, 2021a; Pradhan and Valentin, 2021), where new policies attempt to resolve the unfinished goals of earlier efforts of implementing aspects of LCE. By documenting everyday practices, this study contributes to understanding how contextual and cultural landscapes shape teaching–learning processes, knowledge construction, and teacher–student relationships. These insights, often missing from Nepali education debates, aim to inform more contextually grounded reform efforts and, ideally, support a new karmic cycle that strengthens teaching and learning.

Justification for the use of the Minimum Standards

The study uses the MS (Schweisfurth, 2013) as its conceptual framework. It offers a flexible yet structured approach to examining the nuances and fluidity of teaching–learning practices. In this study, the MS framework functions as an organising principle for presenting the findings rather than as evaluative criteria. It acts as a scaffolding tool to unpack pedagogical practices. MS's greatest strength lies in its adaptability and its capacity to reflect diverse contextual realities across the schools, which is an essential feature given the cultural and structural variation highlighted earlier. While flexibility alone does not guarantee the feasibility or applicability of LCE reform, MS provides a coherent lens for capturing these realities helps develop a nuanced understanding of pedagogical practices. In contrast to other models reviewed in this chapter, the

MS model accommodates both systemic constraints and everyday practices including cultural assumptions, making them particularly suited for this study.

MS closely aligns with government and policy priorities. It provides a structured way of unpacking the pedagogical practices documented in the three schools, considering the wider LCE reform agenda. In particular for this study, MS1 (engagement, motivation and participation), MS 2 (mutual respect), and MS4 (dialogue) offered useful lenses for examining the granular and prevalent practices that shape interactions in the classrooms. MS 6 (curriculum is based on skills and attitude outcomes as well as content) was used as a structural anchor to understand how learning in lessons was organised as the national curriculum was aligned to this MS. MS 7 (assessment) is a key in the policies and also was central in influencing pedagogical practices and beliefs. Rather than imposing an external structure onto the data, the MS enabled a coherent interpretation of how everyday practices intersect with the principles promoted through policy reforms. These are the standards used to organise the findings chapters.

Summary

This chapter examines the conceptual complexities of LCE, tracing its global appeal and the cognitive, emancipatory, and preparatory rationales for its widespread adoption across LICs (Schweisfurth, 2013). Although promising, these ideals remain contested and difficult to define, as they often travel across contexts as a 'policy panacea' (Sriprakash, 2010) that overlooks contextual realities.

The chapter explores critiques of LCE as an ideological tool, its epistemic misalignment with cultural norms (Guthrie, 2017; Tabulawa, 2003) and the practical challenges of implementing it in resource-constrained settings (O'Sullivan, 2004). It reviews multiple models and frameworks, including Schweisfurth's MS, which offers a flexible approach to contextualising LCE.

These debates reinforce the recurring pattern of reform failure described earlier through the metaphor of the karmic cycle, where ambitious policies are repeatedly introduced to 'fix' systemic issues, only to loop back into partial implementation because deeper cultural and structural conditions remain unaddressed.

Finally, I discuss my rationale for using Schweisfurth's (2013) Minimum Standards (MS) as the conceptual framework for this thesis.

Chapter 5. LCE implementation across the world: a review of literature

Building on the conceptual debates and contested definitions of LCE discussed in *Chapter 4*, this chapter turns to the empirical literature and examines how these reform ideals play out in practice. While *Chapter 4* discussed the theoretical, ideological, and contextual complexities surrounding LCE as a travelling policy, this chapter reviews studies. These studies show how these ideas are interpreted, adapted, and enacted across Low-Income Countries (LICs). Together, the studies illustrate how reform ideals travel, how they become reshaped in practice, and why persistent tensions between policy and everyday classroom realities continue to emerge.

LCE reforms frequently travel through global policy borrowing, shaped by donor agendas and international narratives about improving educational quality (Regmi, 2021; Steiner-Khamsi, 2018). Yet studies consistently show that these reforms frequently misalign with local sociocultural, political, and material realities (Steiner-Khamsi, 2025; Tabulawa, 2003). As Ball (1998) cautions, such 'borrowed policies' are often treated as magical solutions. They overlook the structural inequalities, contextual variations, and everyday constraints that characterise the lived realities of schools, resulting in implementation that is fragmented and uneven (Altinyelken and Sözeri, 2019; Napier, 2005; Sayed and Badroodien, 2016).

The studies reviewed in this chapter are drawn primarily from LICs in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, where LCE reforms have been widely promoted. The chapter also draws on (but not exclusively) four major reviews: Bremner et al. (2022), Guthrie (2017), Sakata et al. (2022), and Schweisfurth (2011), alongside Westbrook et al.'s (2013) analysis of over 400 studies. The review provides further insights into how LCE has been implemented, highlighting both the scale of the literature and the recurrent challenges that shape implementation across diverse contexts.

Although many contexts appear to face similar issues, each country operates within its own pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and onto-cultural perspectives (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). This variation is reflected in Vavrus' (2009) observation that "commonality in values regarding intergenerational relations of authority and didactic teaching methods do not translate into identical classroom practice across a continent as diverse

as Africa" (p. 304). Her insight resonates more broadly, as similar reform discourses often generate divergent practices across different schooling systems. A comparative lens therefore allows for a more nuanced understanding of how education reforms interact with specific cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2014).

The sections that follow synthesise the literature on the enabling and constraining factors shaping LCE implementation. The organisation of themes draws on the categories used in the reviews by Schweisfurth (2011) and Sakata et al. (2022). A separate section then focuses on Nepal, where I discuss in greater depth empirical studies of classroom practice and LCE implementation.

How literature was identified

The literature was identified using the University of Glasgow Library's database system. I conducted searches in ERIC, Scopus, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, using the library's advanced search function. I used key terms such as Learner-Centred Education, travelling policies, LCE in implementation, LMICs/global south, teacher identity/experiences, and children's learning experiences (see full list in *Appendix 11*). Policy documents and reports were accessed through official organisational websites, including USAID, the World Bank, and Nepali government portals. I also searched online Nepali newspapers, especially about corporal punishment and teachers' strikes.

The review for this chapter focused on literature examining the implementation of LCE in LIC contexts. I included empirical studies, comparative work, and major reviews that examined LCE reform implementation, teacher practices, classroom enactment of LCE, implementation challenges, and related training or reform processes. I excluded studies focusing solely on higher education, early childhood, or non-school settings, as well as papers discussing LCE only at a conceptual or theoretical level without engagement with implementation or classroom practice. These criteria helped narrow the literature to research directly relevant to understanding how LCE is interpreted and enacted in schools in LIC contexts, global empirical patterns, and methodological trends.

Most of the published empirical studies reviewed primarily present teachers' voices and experiences through data collected from classroom observations and interviews. While the literature is dominated by qualitative approaches, a few

studies employ quantitative or mixed-method designs, often using surveys to capture broader patterns of teacher beliefs and practices (Bremner et al., 2025; Serbessa, 2006). Additionally, a consistent pattern emerges in the study of LCE reform implementation. This is characterised by a focus on teachers' experiences, reliance on simple indicators of implementation, and overlooking the contextual realities that shape education reforms.

It is also evident that learners' perspectives are often marginalised, particularly in LICs (Adamson and Brown, 2024; Sakata, 2023). It appears paradoxical that the reforms intended to promote LCE often neglect to make learners central to the process (Brown, 2025). This study seeks to fill this gap by highlighting learners' experiences through their voices. It acknowledges that teaching, learning, and pedagogical practices are co-created within particular cultural and contextual environments (Lattimer, 2015).

Structural and material conditions

LCE implementation assumes that schools have the necessary infrastructure and materials (Jessop and Penny, 1998; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012a; Vavrus and Salema, 2013). Yet many do not, a point widely noted across the literature (Sakata et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2011). Resource shortages and lack of infrastructure remain persistent barriers to LCE in low-income contexts (Sakata et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2011).

Across Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010b), Tanzania (Barrett, 2007), Namibia (O'Sullivan, 2002), and India (Sriprakash, 2009), classrooms often lack basic furniture or usable space, with fixed benches limiting movement and interaction. Other schools lack fundamental infrastructure: monastic classes held in corridors in Myanmar (Lall, 2011), cramped rooms without electricity in Bhutan (Gordon, 2013), or unreliable water and power in Cambodian schools (Song, 2015). In such settings, teaching itself becomes difficult, making LCE reforms a secondary concern. Textbook shortages were also commonly reported across LICs. This further constrains pedagogical practices and lesson planning (Westbrook et al., 2013).

Furthermore, teachers in Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010a; Sikoyo, 2010) and Ethiopia (Serbessa, 2006) are constantly navigating and readjusting lessons to resource-constrained contexts. This includes limited scientific equipment, teaching aids,

or basic classroom materials that affect their ability to implement problem-based or thematic teaching methods (Altinyelken, 2010a). This shapes what is realistically achievable. Studies from India (Niesz and Ryan, 2018) and the Maldives (Di Biase, 2019a) suggest that adequate resources can support teacher experimentation with teaching-learning approaches . However, evidence from Vietnam shows that materials alone do not shift practice suggesting that deeper factors are at play (Le, 2018).

Taken together, these studies show how material conditions lead to pedagogical choices and how LCE is interpreted and enacted, linking back to earlier discussions of travelling policy and its translation in practice.

Classroom organisation and participation

Large class sizes are consistently identified as a barrier to implementing LCE (Guthrie, 2017; Tabulawa, 2013). Barrett's (2007) study in Tanzania shows that teachers managing classes of up to one hundred students relied on teacher-centred approaches because they were the only practical way to deliver lessons. The size of the class limited opportunities for interaction and made alternative strategies unmanageable, shaping what was realistically possible within LCE.

Cambodian teachers reported similar difficulties in managing large classes, noting that lessons often became too noisy to employ LCE approaches (Song, 2015). Song's later work highlights a wider disjuncture between teachers' positive beliefs about LCE and the prevalent teacher-centred practices used during lessons to manage overcrowded classrooms (Song, 2015). These accounts emphasise how class size and everyday management demands shape what forms of participation are workable in practice.

Similarly, teachers in Uganda (O'Sullivan, 2006), Bhutan (Childs et al., 2012), and India (Sriprakash, 2010) also reported that overcrowded classrooms limited their ability to actively involve students in learning. The combination of managing large class sizes within small classroom spaces was challenging, leaving little scope for providing individualised feedback (Altinyelken, 2010b). These accounts highlight the broader issue of how LCE can be tailored to the specific circumstances teachers face, rather than assumed to transfer uniformly across contexts (Bremner, 2021).

Studies also show how teachers attempt to manage large classes through creative strategies. In Uganda, teachers used group work, songs, and storytelling to engage learners and often worked in teams to address lesson delivery and student needs (Akello et al., 2016; Croft, 2002; Nakabugo et al., 2006). However, an issue that arose was that the more capable learners tended to dominate activities, overshadowing others (Akello et al., 2016; Nakabugo et al., 2006). This illustrates how teachers negotiate crowded classrooms in ways that are locally workable, even as structural constraints continue to shape what forms of participation are possible (Sikoyo, 2010).

A persistent challenge in implementing LCE in LICs is the wide diversity of learners within classrooms. Teachers frequently reported difficulties in addressing individual needs due to students' varying abilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and levels of preparedness (Sakata et al., 2022). Research from Bhutan (Childs et al., 2012) and Myanmar (Lall, 2011) shows that students' ability levels vary greatly, making it hard for teachers to support every learner effectively.

Together, the issues of class size and learner diversity illustrate how reform policies promoting LCE are often in conflict with the everyday realities of teachers' work. These dynamics contribute to the recurring patterns described earlier in the karmic cycle of reform, where implementation becomes partial and uneven when structural and contextual conditions are not adequately addressed.

Teacher beliefs, values and cultural logics

Teachers in LICs are often blamed by policymakers for the failure to implement reforms such as LCE (Bremner et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2011). They are often labelled homogeneously as being closed-minded, inflexible, and incapable of experimenting with new strategies (Tao, 2013, 2016). Yet teachers find themselves navigating complex day-to-day realities (Barrett, 2007; Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008).

Policy-makers often overlook the contexts in which teachers work, yet these conditions strongly shape whether reforms such as LCE can be implemented in practice. Teachers frequently describe feeling disempowered within bureaucratic school structures (Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008). Teachers

are under significant pressure to complete the curriculum, meet assessment requirements, and satisfy shifting management expectations (Altinyelken, 2010a; Mungoo and Moorad, 2015). Many teachers also report limited involvement in decision-making (Childs et al., 2012), and financial strain that necessitates additional work (Lall, 2011; Song, 2015). These pressures affect teachers' sense of agency and inevitably shape how they respond to policy reforms (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). These working conditions sit alongside the cultural expectations and beliefs discussed in the following paragraphs, shaping how teachers make sense of LCE reforms.

Research from Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates how deep-rooted cultural expectations of respect, hierarchy, and orderly conduct influence teachers' views and interactions with LCE. These expectations include that children respect elders by listening rather than questioning (Tabulawa, 1998). Tabulawa suggests that reforms therefore often fail to influence teachers' behaviour. . Similarly, Tanaka's (2020) study found that lessons often included long periods of silence during teacher delivery. Students sought to please teachers by giving answers they expected (Tanaka, 2020). Similar findings across multiple countries raise concerns that more interactive classrooms may challenge teachers' authority or appear undisciplined (Du Plessis, 2020; Webb and Mkongo, 2013). Vavrus and Bartlett (2012b) observed that pre-service teachers worry about losing legitimacy in participatory settings, a concern reinforced by historical ties between authority, discipline, and corporal punishment (Bermeo et al., 2013; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012b). These studies indicate that LCE can conflict with culturally ingrained hierarchical norms (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017), but such beliefs can change over time (Rugambwa and Thomas, 2013).

Research in various East Asian settings uncovers common tensions between LCE and local cultural views of authority. Research from Myanmar (Lall, 2011), Vietnam (Ho and Dimmock, 2023; Saito et al., 2008), Cambodia (Song, 2015), and Indonesia (Treagust, 2004) document classrooms in which teachers are respected as sources of knowledge and in which silence and orderly conduct are valued and emphasised.

Lall's (2011) research in Myanmar highlights concerns that LCE could undermine the cultural norm of respect for elders, whereas Ho and Dimmock (2023) observe that Vietnam's cultural norms prioritise deference based on age, rank, and

status. Together, these studies illustrate how deeply embedded expectations around authority and appropriate classroom conduct shape teachers' interpretations of LCE, and why reforms that do not attend to these cultural logics are often resisted or reworked.

Studies across South Asia highlight comparable tensions between LCE and culturally embedded expectations of respect and hierarchy. Research from India (Brinkmann, 2015, 2019; Sriprakash, 2010), Pakistan (Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008), Bhutan (Gordon, 2013), the Maldives (Di Biase, 2019a), and Sri Lanka (Johnson, 2006) highlight embedded norms that position teachers as authoritative figures responsible for maintaining control and transmitting knowledge, rather than believing in facilitating the construction. In these settings, the dialogic and participatory elements of LCE are often seen as challenging established cultural norms, roles and relationships within the classroom. These studies do not portray these norms as obstacles in themselves, but show how they shape teachers' interpretations of LCE in context.

Brinkmann (2019) argues that teachers' beliefs are deeply rooted in their cultural contexts, where teaching is shaped by "thousands of hours spent in classrooms" (p. 344). These experiences inform assumptions about learners' capabilities and reinforce broader cultural expectations around authority and knowledge transmission. As discussed in *Chapter 4*, such epistemology orientations can conflict with the constructivist foundations of LCE (Tabulawa, 2013). This makes it essential to identify pedagogical practices that align with local onto-cultural perspectives (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) while still supporting meaningful forms of learning.

Brinkmann's (2015, 2019) and Sriprakash's (2009, 2010) studies are also useful for thinking about Nepal, as they emphasise how teachers' beliefs are shaped by the cultural and social contexts where they work. Although India and Nepal share aspects of the Hindu caste system, its manifestations differ across the two countries, shaped by Nepal's historical mix of Hindu and Buddhist influences (Gellner et al., 2012; Karki, 2014) (see *Chapter 2*). These studies, therefore, highlight the importance of examining the specific cultural contexts within which pedagogical practices in Nepal are situated, rather than assuming direct parallels with neighbouring countries (Alexander, 2008b).

What is also important is that teachers in India viewed learning as a serious discipline and knowledge was to be transmitted by the learned teacher to pupils (Brinkmann, 2019; Clarke, 2003; Sriprakash, 2010). It is important to note that teachers' teaching beliefs and practices stem from the conception of how knowledge exists (Vavrus, 2009). This is why LCE reforms have to be carefully contextualised to meet the needs of specific areas.

While many studies highlight the tensions between LCE and local cultural norms, some research demonstrates the potential for context-responsive adaptations of LCE reforms. Lattimer's (2015) study of Kenyan secondary classrooms shows how culturally responsive adjustments within established teacher-centred traditions can support more participatory learning and LCE. Subtle shifts in language and questioning practices achieved higher engagement, continuous assessment, and peer collaboration. This aligns with the essence of Minimum Standards (Schweisfurth, 2013), which emphasises context-attuned enactments of learner-centred principles. This insight is central to this study, which explores how pedagogical practices in Nepal might similarly be shaped, adapted, and reimagined within local cultural logics rather than imposed as external reform.

Teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences inherently shape the way teaching and learning occur, as well as how reforms are understood and implemented. Yet these aspects are often overlooked in policy construction and implementation (Schweisfurth, 2025b). When cultural logics and epistemic orientations are not considered, reforms such as LCE remain symbolic rather than being translated into everyday practice (Ball, 1994).

Institutional and structural influences

School leaders play a central role in mediating between policy expectations and the practical realities where teachers work (Brooks and Brooks, 2019). Their ability to translate reform messages into workable practice often depends on navigating teachers' social and political concerns (Khaniya and Williams, 2004), which can make new approaches seem misaligned with local norms (Brinkmann, 2019). Across studies, the degree to which teachers feel supported by colleagues, supervisors, government agencies, and principals emerges as an important factor that influences whether reforms are taken up meaningfully (Sakata et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2011,).

Evidence from parts of India indicates that reforms gain traction when supported by strong, sustained institutional backing (Bremner et al., 2025; Niesz and Ryan, 2018). In Tamil Nadu, state officials actively championed Activity-Based Learning reform. They organised extensive teacher training and continued to monitor and encourage practice as it unfolded (Niesz and Ryan, 2018). Community engagement also played a role, as parents and local actors were persuaded of its value. Together, these layers of support show that policy uptake improves when stakeholders share a common commitment and teachers feel supported by the wider system (Niesz and Ryan, 2018).

A similar pattern appears in Bremner et al.'s (2025) study of private schools in Mumbai. Teachers adopted interactive and formative approaches when these were explicitly prioritised by school leaders. This signalled that everyday teaching was influenced by what the administration deemed important and encouraged (Bremner et al., 2025). Together, these examples illustrate how multi-level support from government actors to school leaders helps shape teachers' responses to policy and increases the likelihood of meaningful implementation.

Further studies show that teachers are more willing to adapt and experiment with LCE practices when they feel supported by school leaders. In the Maldives, teachers reported that having resources and encouragement from principals made it easier to implement new strategies (Di Biase, 2019a). Similarly, Croft's (2002) work in Malawi highlights how leaders who understand the principles of LCE created space for teachers to develop contextually relevant practices. Together, these studies highlight how leadership support fosters teacher buy-in and helps translate policy ideas into everyday practice.

Conversely, several studies show how LCE reforms fail when leadership and local actors do not support them. In Bhutan, teachers and principals worked in isolation, leaving little incentive to attempt new approaches (Gordon, 2013). O'Sullivan's (2002, 2004) work in Namibia similarly highlights how weak leadership engagement and limited interest in LCE reform undermined implementation. In Myanmar, head monks resisted LCE on the grounds that it conflicted with established norms of authority, blocking teachers who wished to implement learner-centred approaches (Lall, 2011).

The influence of training on implementing LCE

Policymakers often assume that teachers will either automatically enact reforms or that they lack the expertise to do so (Napier, 2005; Tao, 2016). This has led governments to invest heavily in training programmes intended to familiarise teachers with LCE and pedagogies (Le, 2018). Yet these efforts have rarely been attributed to being successful in shifting classroom practice, as teachers often find it challenging to apply what they 'learn' into their everyday teaching-learning (Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008).

Training often fails to translate into classroom practice because the environments in which teachers are trained do not reflect the realities in which they are expected to work. This mismatch was clearly seen in Mohammad and Harlech-Jones' (2008) study of Pakistani pre-service teachers, who noted that their training settings differed markedly from their actual classrooms. As a result, many felt unprepared and believed they lacked the skills and resources needed to deliver LCE in practice (Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008).

Teachers' pedagogical practices are shaped by the experiences and modelled behaviour they encounter (Flores and Day, 2006). Mtika and Gates' (2010) study of Malawian pre-service teachers showed that, despite receiving training on LCE, the trainees lacked the pedagogical skills needed to engage learners because they could not see how these approaches worked in practice. They learnt LCE principles largely through note-taking rather than observation or demonstration. This left the teachers unsure about how to apply the ideas during their own lessons (Mtika and Gates, 2010). This also suggests that trainers themselves may not have fully understood or are not able to model LCE, raising questions about the credibility of these programmes (Mtika and Gates, 2010).

Similarly, Clarke's (2003) study in India shows that trainers often taught only aspects of LCE with which they were comfortable, resulting in training that remained highly teacher-centred and inflexible. Trainers were noted to selectively model LCE that helped maintain control over all teaching–learning processes and decisions (Clarke, 2003). Subsequently, teachers had little opportunity to engage with the broader concepts and values of LCE (Clarke, 2003). This lack of openness limited teachers' opportunities to experience LCE in practice, thereby contradicting the participatory principles the reform was intended to promote.

Additionally, some training programmes on LCE in LICs are densely packed with content, leaving little room for reflection. Altinyelken's (2010a) study indicates that the ten-day curriculum training was too short and that trainers lacked a full grasp of the curriculum. This left teachers and school leaders with limited space to engage with its concepts. Without adequate time or knowledgeable support, teachers found it easier to return to their existing practices (Altinyelken, 2010a).

Sakata et al. (2022) find that trainings are more effective when they create time and a dialogic space for teachers to work with LCE ideas. This also encourages experimentation and extends support and mentoring of practices. Teachers engage more meaningfully when trainers model the practices. Additionally, co-teaching and co-planning provide real-time opportunities to work through approaches (Sakata et al., 2022). Thompson's (2013) study in Nigeria illustrates how dialogue with the teacher educator enabled trainees to 'culturally translate' LCE into practices that fit their contexts. Comparable patterns are reported in Bremner et al. (2025) and in Niesz and Krishnamurthy (2013). Di Biase's work in the Maldives (2019a, 2019b) reinforces this pattern, in which teachers developed more contextual forms of LCE practices. They did so by working closely with a trainer through dialogue, experimentation, and feedback on their new techniques (Di Biase, 2019a, 2019b).

A major obstacle to implementing LCE is the disjuncture between reform rhetoric and the expectations built into the curriculum (Gordon, 2013; Schweisfurth, 2011). Much of the literature indicates that the curricula of many LICs are overloaded with content (Sakata et al., 2022). They are expected to be completed within tight timeframes, which leaves little room for designing interactive lessons. As a result, educators tend to stick to established routines (Lattimer, 2015). Another issue is that LCE reforms were introduced while the curriculum itself remained centrally prescribed, giving teachers limited autonomy to improvise or adapt lessons (Hamid and Honan, 2012; Saito et al., 2008). This illustrates how reform agendas often overlook the structural conditions that shape classroom practice.

Not only does a content-heavy curriculum limit opportunity for LCE, but many LICs continue to rely on high-stakes examinations, which prioritise content assessment (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012b; Westbrook et al., 2013). The exams

"assess students' knowledge of discrete, factual information, or declarative knowledge, rather than more complex cognitive skills" (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012b, p. 641). Since success is often measured by exam results, for teachers, school leaders, and communities, teacher-centred methods remain the most reliable way to ensure that students acquire the knowledge needed to perform well in exams (Bantwini, 2010; Childs et al., 2012). Altinyelken (2010a) illustrates how even when the new thematic curriculum was introduced in Ugandan schools, the importance of the primary leaving examinations was not undermined. Similar patterns appear in the Vavrus (2009), Lall (2011), and Mtika and Gates (2010) studies, where teachers' success continued to be judged by students' ability to memorise content and reproduce correct answers in tests. These practices draw on deeper beliefs of what is considered to be knowledge and how learning takes place (Brinkmann, 2019). It reflects the deeper onto-cultural assumptions that need to be understood (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017).

Children's voices and experiences in LCE

Despite LCE placing the learner at the centre of pedagogical reform, children's own voices and experiences remain notably marginal (Brown, 2025 ; Sakata, 2023). The focus on understanding how global policies such as LCE travel, and implementation challenges, make children's experiences almost invisible (Brown, 2022). Children are often represented through data about learning achievements and outcomes rather than as active participants in classrooms (Adamson and Brown, 2024). This invisibility contributes to "default characterisation … of children as a passive, struggling mass" (Brown, 2022, p. 2).

Studies highlighting children's experiences demonstrate how crucial these perspectives are for understanding the lived teaching-learning realities. Tabulawa (1997; 2004), through classroom observations, documents how the students in secondary school in Botswana valued hierarchy and orderly conduct. They also believed in respecting their elders, and so preferred the teacher-centred teaching over LCE (Tabulawa, 1997; 2004). Adamson and Brown (2024), drawing on two in-depth qualitative studies in Tanzania, highlight how children across primary and secondary schools internalised elements of the hidden curriculum (Westbrook et al., 2013). These included perceiving teachers as the primary holders of knowledge, placing value on correctness, and not making

mistakes. Such behaviour and beliefs helped them perform well in exams and protected them from ridicule or punishment (Adamson and Brown, 2024).

Sakata's doctoral study (2019) based in Tanzania provides further evidence that classroom processes are co-constructed by both teachers and students. Students' expectations, attitudes, and feelings towards their teachers influenced how teachers engaged with and taught in lessons (Sakata, 2019). The interactions also reflected deep shared cultural and epistemological beliefs (Sakata, 2019). Children's perceptions of learner-centred pedagogy also differed depending on whether they attended a private or public school. Students in rural public schools were afraid to express their opinions due to a rigid hierarchical structure, in which corporal punishment was prevalent, and they also faced greater resource constraints (Sakata, 2019). Again, this demonstrates how pedagogical practices are embedded within deeply connected contextual and cultural assumptions, highlighting the importance of understanding these pedagogical nexuses (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019).

These studies demonstrate that children do not simply respond to practices or reforms. Rather, they actively interpret and negotiate the teaching-learning processes within specific cultural, linguistic, and institutional environments (Brown, 2022). This highlights ongoing concerns in Comparative and International Education (CIE) and how learners' voices are missing even though the conversation is about implementing LCE (Brown, 2025; Sakata, 2023; Schweisfurth, 2013). Ironically, how learners interpret, interact with, and experience teaching and learning remains poorly understood. This includes whether learning activities feel engaging, meaningful, or induce anxiety.

This study aims to further contribute to the literature on children's experiences, an essential dimension for understanding pedagogical practices. By emphasising children's perspectives, the research offers a more context-specific account of how students experience teaching and learning in the Nepali context. It directly builds on insights from Brown (2022) and Sakata (2019), demonstrating how learners navigate and make sense of their everyday teaching and learning processes.

Overall, the studies reviewed above demonstrate how LCE reforms were implemented across complex terrain. These global patterns also resonate with the Nepali context, where similar tensions between reform ambitions and

everyday schooling shape how students and teachers experience teaching and learning. The following section, therefore, turns to the empirical literature on Nepal to examine how these broader dynamics are reflected in local pedagogical practices and how learners and teachers navigate them in their own contexts.

Studies on Nepal

Viewed through Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017b) CCS vertical-axis, Nepal's reforms reveal how global agendas shape national policy and become entangled with local micro-politics. Nepal's education reforms often align with global targets, driven by donor funding and the political capital associated with introducing schooling reform (Regmi, 2022). At the ground level, however, these reforms are frequently reduced to meeting 'targets' shaped by micro-politics, even when decision-making appears more participatory (Caddell, 2005; Mathema, 2007). Caddell (2006) found that local authorities in an eastern Nepal district was more focused on generating data to satisfy agreed-upon educational goals with donors rather than implementing education policies. This resulted in superficial compliance without substantive transformation in schools (Caddell, 2005).

The themes identified earlier – the persistence of teacher-centred practices, limited learner participation, resource pressures, and exam-driven teaching – are also evident in Nepal. Nepal's education policies remain in disjuncture with classroom realities, failing to deliver the transformation they promise (Onta, 2021).

Although studies on actual teaching–learning practices in Nepal are limited, the common discourse is that classrooms continue to be dominated by rote learning and memorisation (Faye, 2023; Khanal, 2011). Koirala-Azad (2008) notes how such practices produce 'learned silence', leaving little space for recognising students' own experiences. The curriculum remains heavily textbook-driven with minimal attention to individual needs, and instruction focuses on content delivery (Lohani et al., 2010). High-stakes examinations further contradict the principles of LCE (Bajracharya and Brouwer, 1997). These patterns mirror those faced by other LICs, as described in earlier sections (Schweisfurth, 2011).

However, there are available studies from Nepal that help us understand how culturally grounded pedagogical approaches can support more interactive forms of learning. Bajracharya and Brouwer's (1997) work with science teachers in

Kathmandu showed that using local stories made scientific concepts more relatable and engaging, and teachers responded positively to these familiar approaches. Although this study reflects perspectives from the early 1990s, it remains significant for demonstrating how teachers and students co-construct learning when pedagogy resonates with local culture. More recent findings from Wagle et al. (2023) reinforce this point, demonstrating that when teachers collaborate with trainers and experiment with methods grounded in local culture, they adopt more interactive pedagogies. These findings reinforce prior discussions of culturally sensitive practices (Lattimer, 2015). They support the argument that LCE exists on a continuum rather than as an absolute (Schweisfurth, 2013), even in systems with limited resources or high examination pressure (Croft, 2002).

Another recurring theme in Nepali research is the role of schools in 'instilling discipline'. Caddell's ethnographic study (2007b) of private schools in Eastern Nepal shows how discipline shaped 'modern Nepali citizens'. It promoted nationalism and loyalty while distancing students from 'traditional backwardness' (Caddell, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). Textbooks and school materials reflected donor influence, shaping ideals of modernity and development (Caddell, 2006, 2007a) (see Chapters *1* and *2* for details on *bikas*). She highlights how cultural assumptions about discipline intersect with reform agendas, reinforcing hierarchical norms even as policies advocate learner autonomy.

Similarly, Phyak (2022) documents how schools enforce strict standards of appearance, clean uniforms, trimmed nails, and tidy hair, as markers of quality and good behaviour. Thebe Limbu (2021) reports students' experiences of public shaming and corporal punishment for non-compliance. These practices are rooted in cultural norms of respect and control (Baindur, 2021). These often conflict with LCE principles present in reform mandates of mutual respect and learner agency (Brinkmann, 2019).

Ham's (2018) doctoral research provides further insight into teachers' responses to reform. Using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, Ham surveyed 327 primary school teachers in Kathmandu, conducted classrooms, and conducted focus groups with teachers. Her findings (2018) reveal that while teachers expressed positive attitudes toward LCE and endorsed its principles, classroom practices remained teacher-centred and content-driven. Teacher-

student relationships, however, reflected care and responsibility, aligning partially with LCE ideals. Dahal et al. (2022) reported similar patterns: teachers ensured students' well-being by providing clean clothes and taking them to hospitals when necessary. However, these actions were framed as part of their moral duty rather than as learner-centred pedagogy (Dahal et al., 2022).

Ham and Menzie-Ballantyne (2021) challenge assumptions of passive resistance against LCE policies. The failure in transformation was because of inadequate teacher support and ambiguity in policies (Di Biase et al., 2021). Rather, teachers actively analysed educational changes alongside broader societal shifts. Teachers recognised their role in fostering students' confidence and competence to challenge caste hierarchies and pursue aspirations (Ham and Menzie-Ballantyne, 2021). However, they reported feeling excluded from decision-making, and perceived reforms as politically motivated experiments rather than genuine efforts to improve learning (Ham and Dekkers, 2019). These findings align with global patterns discussed earlier, in which inadequate support and unclear expectations undermine reform implementation (Guthrie, 2017).

Overall, these studies offer a fragmented yet insightful picture of how LCE reforms are interpreted and enacted in Nepal. They reveal persistent tensions between policy aspirations and classroom realities (O'Sullivan, 2002), shaped by cultural norms, systemic constraints, and teacher beliefs. Importantly, student perspectives remain largely absent, a gap this study seeks to address by highlighting both teacher and learner voices. In doing so, it contributes to a more grounded understanding of what is happening in classrooms and how teaching and learning take place. The findings chapters build on this foundation, offering insights into everyday practices manifest through teachers' and students' perceptions, beliefs, and negotiations.

Summary

This chapter examines how LCE reforms have been implemented across LICs, highlighting recurring patterns of adaptation, resistance, and unintended consequences. Three points stand out. First, implementation challenges are not simply technical. They are deeply rooted in cultural logics, systemic constraints, and resource limitations. Second, while global discourses frame LCE as a policy panacea (Sriprakash, 2010), its implementation often results in fragmented

practices that fail to deliver the promised visions. Third, these dynamics reveal a recurring karmic cycle of reform, where ambitious policies are repeatedly introduced without addressing the structural and cultural conditions that shape classroom realities. A consistent gap across the global literature, including Nepal, is how children navigate their learning and how their perspectives shape classroom practices (Brown, 2022; Sakata, 2019).

Chapter 6. Actors and agency

This chapter focuses on teachers and learners as the two groups of actors at the centre of everyday teaching–learning in Nepali classrooms. Building on the conceptual discussions in *Chapter 4* and the literature review outlined in *Chapter 5*, It examines how both groups make sense of and participate in these processes within the constraints and expectations of the wider education system. The first section explores teachers' identities, working conditions, and the cultural and institutional logics shaping their practices, while the second turns to learners' experiences and perspectives, which remain largely absent from policy and research despite their centrality to reform. Together, these discussions continue the shift from policy ideals to lived classroom realities, providing the grounding needed to understand how pedagogical practices are shaped, negotiated, and experienced.

Teachers

National newspaper headlines illustrate how the role of teachers has become a contested issue, contributing to the prevailing narrative that the public education system is deteriorating and failing (Pradhan and Valentin, 2021). Public debate often centres on who is responsible, with many attributing the decline to teachers' lack of accountability. They are portrayed as unionised and politicised, and some argue that teachers have shifted from dedicated educators to 'political cadres' (Pherali, 2017). See *Figure 6* for excerpts from national newspapers that highlight these tensions.

Figure 6: Excerpts from the Nepali national newspapers



This public narrative contrasts sharply with how teachers themselves describe their experiences:

> *"I keep blaming my karma (fate) for becoming a teacher. It is a thankless job. I feel like society does not want teachers; it wants healers and fixers who magically make everything go away! They say we are jeopardising the country's future by not doing our jobs properly and by not getting the results that they want for the children." (A teacher participant sharing her frustrations)*

Teachers are considered essential changemakers who are responsible for translating policies into practice and almost magically fixing the education system and the social problems present in society (Sayed and Badroodien, 2016; Tao, 2016). In LICs, they are often blamed for policy failures (Anderson, 2023). They are often described as lacking the skills to implement reforms or adjust to ideas of 'progressivism' (Guthrie, 2017).

This connects clearly to the aim of this thesis and to the metaphor of the karmic cycle, where teachers' identities and practices represent the *prarabdha*, the present reality inherited by each new reform cycle. Understanding these realities is crucial to breaking the recurring pattern of partial implementation within Nepal's evolving educational landscape.

These inherited realities also reflect the cultural expectations placed on teachers, which continue to shape how their roles are imagined in Nepal:

- "A teacher is like a candle, who burns themselves to give light to others."
- "The Guru (teacher) is Brahma, the Guru is Vishnu, the Guru is Lord Maheshwara (Shiva)."

Together, these sayings portray teaching as both a profound act of self-sacrifice and a sacred duty, elevating the teacher to a divine status in Nepali culture. Yet this idealised vision contrasts with the everyday realities of how teachers view themselves and are perceived.

Teachers in Nepal are embedded within the broader contexts of the school education system and the country's socio-economic history. They are crucial to implementing educational reforms and achieving high-quality learning outcomes (MoEST, 2021). According to the Flash Report 2081 BS (2024/25), there are a

total of 190, 634 across community schools. There are 154,221 teachers at the basic level and 36, 413 at the secondary level across community schools (CEHRD, 2024). While gender and ethnic representation show gradual progress toward inclusivity, persistent disparities remain.

At the national level, 54.6% of teachers in Grades 1–5 are female, compared with 36.4% in Grades 6–8 and 25.6% in Grades 9–10. Teachers from *Bahun-Chettri* backgrounds constitute most of the workforce, followed by *Janajati*, *Madhesi*, and *Dalit* teachers, with representation of Dalit and other marginalised groups remaining low (CEHRD, 2024). Policies outlined in the Teachers Service Commission Act (2000) aim to promote equitable representation in recruitment (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022). However, this remains a challenge.

Teacher recruitment and contractual categories

Teacher recruitment follows both centralised and decentralised modalities. The Teachers Service Commission (TSC) manages the recruitment of permanent teachers through national-level examinations (MoEST, 2023). Applicants must hold a teaching licence and meet minimum eligibility criteria, which include either a bachelor's or a master's degree, depending on the level. The process involves two phases:

- **A General Paper** (multiple-choice questions assessing general knowledge)
- **A Subject Paper** (testing subject expertise), followed by an interview.

Successful candidates are placed on a merit list and assigned to community schools with vacancies. This process mirrors civil service recruitment. In contrast, local governments appoint temporary and grant-supported teachers. Understanding the various teacher appointments is essential, as these have often been sources of contention in community schools and the public schooling system (Khanal, 2011; Uprety, 2021a).

The different categories of teacher appointments indicate the varied employment conditions in community schools. Permanent teachers are appointed by the TSC through competitive exams and receive full government benefits, while temporary, *Rahat*, PCF, and local teachers work with fewer benefits, lower pay and higher turnover. See details in *Table 10*.

Table 10: Overview of teacher appointment categories

Teacher Type	Description
Permanent Teachers	Appointed by TSC through competitive exams; enjoy full government benefits (salary, increments, provident fund, pension, study, paid/unpaid leave).
Temporary Teachers	Appointed by School Management Committees (SMCs) when TSC cannot advertise positions; receive full salary but lack benefits such as increments or pensions.
Rahat Darbandi (Relief Quota)	Fixed-term positions created under donor-funded projects (e.g., Education for All and SSRP); lower pay scale, no additional benefits.
PCF Teachers	Hired under *Per Child Funding* scheme; contractual positions tied to enrolment numbers; limited benefits.
Local Teachers	Appointed by SMCs using local budgets; lowest paid, high turnover; policies for hiring and appraisal set locally.

Table 11 shows the distribution of government-approved teachers by contract type in community schools across basic and secondary levels. As outlined above, permanent teachers hold secure, fully-benefited posts through the TSC, whereas temporary teachers work on less secure contracts with more limited entitlements.

Table 11: Teacher numbers by contract type

Teacher Type (Govt-Approved)	Basic Level (Grades 1-8)	Secondary Level (Grades 9-12)	Total
Permanent Teachers	75,830	11,159	86,989
Temporary Teachers	22,684	7,015	29,699
Rahat (Relief) Teachers	28,837	11,125	39,962
PCF Teachers	6,671	3,278	9,949
Local Teachers	20,199	3,836	24,035
Total	154,221	36,413	190,634

The governance of Nepal's school education is caught in a tug-of-war between the Constitution's decentralisation mandate and the professional interests of the teaching workforce (Jamil and Paudel, 2023). The Constitution of Nepal (2015) envisions the devolution of power by authorising local governments to manage basic and secondary education. The School Education Bill[2] has been a source of

[2] Intended to replace the Education Act 1971, the School Education Bill serves as the primary mechanism for the "handover" of educational authority from the federal government to local levels. While it aligns with constitutional federalism, its passage has been delayed into 2026 by protests from teachers who fear that local-level management will lead to political interference and a loss of the standardised protections currently provided by the central TSC.

contestation and has met fierce opposition from teachers, including the Nepal Teachers' Federation (Devkota, 2025). This tension arises because teachers perceive the TSC as a more reliable, merit-based authority compared with local municipalities, which are often viewed as prone to political and administrative instability (Sabarwal et al., 2021). Consequently, teachers argue that transferring management to the local level threatens their job security and professional standardisation (Jamil and Paudel, 2023). This is fuelled by mistrust of how teachers will be deployed and managed across regions, which requires financial and operational capacity at the local level to ensure equitable provision, especially in remote areas, which are deemed to lack such capacity (Daly et al., 2020; Sabarwal et al., 2021).

Continuous professional development

Continuous professional development (CPD) is a key reform area, operationalised through the *Teacher Professional Development (TPD)* framework and the *Teacher Professional Support System (TPSS)*. Government reports indicate that over 85% of teachers have undergone TPD training to improve pedagogy, ICT use, and inclusive teaching methods (MoEST, 2023). However, evidence of its effectiveness remains mixed. Subedi (2015) argues that training improved behaviour and school quality, whereas Caddell (2007c), Pherali (2011), and Pradhan (2020b) contend that training failed to change classroom practices. Furthermore, this training is still content-driven and is top-down, extracting teachers from the learning process (Pradhan, 2020b). It further tends to culturally homogenise teachers to assimilate into the dominant national hegemony (Pradhan, 2020b). Thus, despite efforts to meet qualification standards, professional development has not consistently translated into expected pedagogical outcomes.

Teachers as agents of resistance

Teachers in Nepal have historically played a significant role in shaping the trajectories of education governance and reform. Teacher unions are among the most organised professional groups, with extensive membership networks and political affiliations (Uprety, 2021a). Their influence extends beyond advocacy, actively shaping policy formation and implementation (Adhikary et al., 2021; Sharma Poudyal, 2015).

By 2014, there were an estimated 18 teacher associations in Nepal (The Kathmandu Post, 2014; Uprety, 2021a), and in 2015, the Nepal Teachers' Federation was established as an umbrella organisation. Approximately 17,000 teachers are active members as political cadres of mainstream parties (Uprety, 2021a). Union membership is large: the Nepal National Teachers' Association has over 70,000 members, and the Leftist and Democratic associations each exceed 83,000 members (Uprety, 2021a). This unionisation is closely tied to politicisation, enabling unions to wield power by occupying decision-making positions (Pherali, 2013). While this strengthens their bargaining capacity, it also raises concerns about accountability, as political interests often overshadow pedagogical priorities (Parajuli and Onta, 2021; Uprety, 2021a). The politicisation of teachers remains under-researched, warranting further study beyond the scope of this thesis.

Unionised organisations have persistently opposed government reforms, including the introduction of School Management Committees (SMCs) (Carney and Bista, 2009). Over the past decade, they have organised repeated strikes and protests, particularly during the seventh, eighth, and ninth amendments of the Education Act 2028 BS (Uprety, 2021a; Uprety, 2021b). Their demands include conversion of temporary contracts into permanent positions, equal treatment with civil servants, higher salaries and regular promotions, and age limits for recruitment (Ghimire, 2023, 2025). These dynamics illustrate how unionisation and politicisation intersect, shaping reform outcomes and influencing the broader governance of Nepal's education system.

Having outlined the contextual realities of teachers in Nepal, their roles, challenges, and the systemic and cultural factors shaping their work, it is important to situate these discussions within broader global debates. One such debate centres on the deficit narrative of teachers in low-income countries (LICs), which frames them through a singular lens of inadequacy.

The deficit narrative of teachers in low-income countries

The failure of education systems and reforms, particularly in LICs, is often attributed to teachers' inability to translate policies into practice or to teach effectively (Anderson, 2023; Tao, 2016). This framing is reinforced through ideas that teachers require "structured teaching interventions including coaching and

that enable(s) teachers to effectively implement curriculum" (World Bank, 2018, p.118). Underlying this is the assumption that teachers are abstracted from their contexts (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a) and simply lack the expertise or motivation to improve (World Bank, 2018). Such assumptions reduce teachers, particularly in LICs, to a single story of failure (Tao, 2016), in which they are repeatedly described as lacking certain characteristics and skills (Pesambili et al., 2022; Sayed and Pesambili, 2026; Sayed et al., 2021).

These deficit labels are "by no means neutral: they embody concrete relationships of power and influence the categories with which we think and act" (Escobar, 1995, 109). IOs and developmental partners often rely on the idea of teacher quality, a concept treated as intuitively understood yet rarely defined precisely because it is deeply context-dependent (Sayed and Badroodien, 2016; Tao, 2016). Teacher quality encompasses a broad range of areas, including teacher performance, behaviour, relationships with students, pedagogical practices, teacher identity, qualifications, and training (Tao, 2016). Despite this complexity, teachers are expected to meet pre-existing standards or preset expectations (Sayed and Ahmed, 2015). In reality, teachers are embedded in deeply complex and constantly evolving contexts (Ham, 2022; Vavrus, 2021). These contexts include navigating under-resourced, materially constrained environments (Sakata et al., 2022). Teachers often have to manage on their own, being underpaid and overworked, with minimal access to professional development (Barrett, 2008; Jessop and Penny, 1998).

Despite this acknowledgement, the standards by which teachers are assessed continue to rely on global metrics of what constitutes an effective teacher (Anderson, 2021, 2023). This deficit framing does not exist in isolation; it is reinforced and reproduced through global discourses and the influence of IOs (World Bank, 2018).

The construct of teachers through International organisations

Recent educational reforms have been shaped by major global organisations such as the World Bank, OECD, and UNESCO, which have emphasised teachers' knowledge, pedagogical skills, and impact on student outcomes (Schweisfurth, 2025b). McKinsey et al.,(2007) reinforce this focus by arguing that the quality of a nation's education system is fundamentally linked to the quality of its

teachers. However, Alexander (2015) cautions against the blanket use of quality standards. This leads to ignoring complex pedagogical processes and contextual realities that shape teaching-learning in favour of measurable inputs and outputs (Alexander, 2015). Through these ideas, global actors reshape how teachers and their work are understood while influencing teacher education policies in LICs such as Nepal (McGrath and Gu, 2015).

Teacher fluidity of identity and agency

Teachers' conceptions of knowledge and learning are shaped by their own experiences and how they encounter the world (Alexander, 2000; Anderson, 2023). These experiences influence their pedagogical practices and shape cultural logics that are not neutral but deeply embedded assumptions about what knowledge is, how learning occurs, and the role of the teacher (Atkinson and King, 2025; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012a).

Understanding these experiences helps us see how teachers view and interpret the world, which in turn shapes their approach to teaching and learning (Jessop and Penny, 1998; Jessop and Penny, 1999). Recognising this is essential for enabling change to happen 'within' rather than attempting to impose it on the system (Jessop and Penny, 1998). Using their comparative study in the Gambia and South Africa as a basis, Jessop and Penny (1998) speak of how the teacher narratives represented the

> *"contradictions between tradition and modernity…; the notion of career choice; and the predominance of two different but intersecting professional outlooks, manifest in teachers' views on teaching, job satisfaction, motivation and morale." (Jessop and Penny, 1998, p.195)*

Furthermore, some teachers were nostalgic about how things were better when they were growing up. They respected teachers more, and students were more responsible, whereas the current children did not work hard and were disrespectful (Jessop and Penny, 1998). I will discuss in *Chapter 12* how this resonates with some of the findings of this study.

These beliefs often intersect with teachers' professional identities, which are neither static nor uniform but fluid and constantly negotiated within reform agendas and contextual realities (Barrett, 2008; Schweisfurth, 2013). Identity reflects both stability and transformation, influenced by cultural principles and

evolving professional standards (Hall, 2015). Therefore, it is vital not to essentialise teacher identities as being universally applicable or fixed (Barrett, 2008).

Research on teacher identity helps us to understand the nuances of how teachers respond to reforms, resist, or change the system (Barrett, 2008). I will draw on two frameworks and typologies: one proposed by Jessop and Penny (1998), based on Gambia and South Africa, and the other by Barrett (2008), based on Tanzanian primary school teachers.

Jessop and Penny (1998) propose "two distinct but sometimes intersecting frames of understanding about teaching" (p. 196). The instrumental frame views teaching as a technical process focused on transmitting knowledge, relying on rote learning and strict adherence to textbooks and syllabi. This leaves little room for teachers to take ownership of their practice, as challenges are often attributed to resources rather than to questions of pedagogy. In contrast, the relational frame sees learning as co-constructed within social and cultural contexts, emphasising care, dialogue, and mutual respect. Yet teachers working within this frame may lack the professional vocabulary or reflective tools to articulate their pedagogical choices, which can reduce practice to routine acts of kindness rather than informed decision-making.

Between these two frames, Jessop and Penny (1998) identify a gap where teachers' embedded assumptions shape their work but remain unexamined. These cultural logics influence how teachers interpret what constitutes knowledge, how learning occurs, and how they understand their responsibilities. This is important for understanding how teachers engage with reforms such as LCE, which are often presented through external reform language and may not align with their lived experiences (Schweisfurth, 2013). These ideas also resonate with teachers in my study, particularly in how they made sense of LCE expectations through their own understandings of teaching and learning, which I return to in *Chapter 12*, the Discussion.

Barrett (2008) presents three typologies that build on Jessop and Penny's framework and help situate the findings for this study. *Relators*, mainly women, understood teaching as grounded in care and relationships. They drew on their own experiences of good teachers, spoke of intrinsic motivation, and wanted

their students to do well. Participation was important to them, although how this appeared in practice varied.

Self-Improvers, mostly men, were qualified teachers seeking to improve their prospects and access better opportunities. Their reflections centred on their own classroom actions rather than on how students engaged, and although they valued the nobility of teaching, they were often frustrated by limited career pathways.

Vocation teachers, generally older and trained in the mid-1980s, had the broadest understanding of what makes a good teacher and of the purposes of primary education. Their practices tended to be restricted to reading and writing, and they balanced intrinsic motivation with the demands of heavy workloads and limited financial rewards. Within this group, Barrett identifies 'gazers' and 'storytellers', teachers influenced by respected role models or by long-standing commitments to the profession.

Barrett (2008) shows that identity does not necessarily translate into reform-oriented practices such as child-centred approaches. For example, relators' emphasis on caring for children coexisted with restrictive pedagogical routines focused on exam results. Generational shifts also shaped how teachers enacted their identities, with younger teachers adopting behaviours similar to those of older teachers, albeit for different reasons. These typologies highlight how teachers' motivations, histories, and cultural logics shape their practice. They also help to contextualise how teachers in my study interpreted LCE through their own experiences and aspirations rather than through the reform language itself.

Jessop and Penny's frameworks (1998) and Barrett's (2008) provide valuable insight into how teachers' identities are shaped and influenced. They also implicitly explore how teachers actively shape these identities. As Barrett (2008) states, despite the similarity of possible circumstances with Jessop and Penny's (1998) study, the framework was not applicable to Tanzanian teachers (or at least not directly). This again highlights how teacher beliefs, values, and identities are fluid and continually being reshaped.

Therefore, for reform implementation to extend beyond superficial levels, these issues must be taken seriously. These frameworks should not be seen as

absolute, but when considered, they offer insights that improve our understanding of why and how things are done.

Earlier sections showed how teachers are positioned through public narratives, policy expectations (*Chapter 2*), and global discourses. They are seen as responsible for repairing systemic failures, with reforms often placing disproportionate responsibility on them (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2013b). Nepali teachers, like those in other LICs, navigate complex environments while implementing reforms and negotiating their identities. Their experiences exist within broader 'policyscapes' (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b; Carney, 2009). Within these, deficit narratives and universalised representations continue to persist. Barrett's typologies and Jessop and Penny's framework demonstrate how culturally embedded teachers' practices are. Recognising these 'invisible' contexts is essential if reforms are to move beyond superficial compliance (Schweisfurth, 2025b).

These dynamics also reflect the karmic cycle metaphor (Chapters *1* and *2*): reforms attempt to 'fix' problems without addressing their deeper cultural and structural roots, thereby perpetuating the same patterns. Teachers' identity and practices form part of the *prarabdha*, the present reality inherited by each reform, showing why change cannot rest on technical adjustments alone. What remains missing is how children navigate these identities and practices. The next section, therefore, turns to learners' experiences, which are central to understanding how these dynamics play out in everyday classroom life.

Engaging with children's voices and experiences

Research on LCE and implementation in LICs consistently shows that reform aspirations confront the everyday realities of classrooms characterised by limited infrastructure, large class sizes, varied learner abilities, constrained teacher preparation, and strong cultural norms around teaching and authority. These patterns are well-documented in the literature on LCE reform policies and implementations (Sakata et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2011; Westbrook et al., 2013) (see *Chapter 5*). These structural, contextual, and cultural realities shape how LCE is interpreted and enacted, and they form the everyday contexts children navigate.

A significant gap exists in the literature on LCE reforms, especially in LIC contexts. Learners' perspectives on their experiences and engagement remain limited despite LCE discourses of centring the child (Brown, 2025; Sakata, 2023). This section presents the various discourses around children's voices and experiences to reinforce why it is so essential for them to be part of the process (Lundy, 2007).

This section also challenges the notion of the 'universal child' that is present across policy reform discourses (as discussed in *Chapter 2*), which frames childhood as a normative, progressive, and abstracted stage following fixed milestones toward adulthood (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a). To do so, I draw on literature on children's voices and the insights they provide.

Meaningful reform must begin by listening to learners and recognising their experiences within cultural, social, and relational contexts (Brown, 2025). Drawing on Rogoff's sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 1994, 2003; Rogoff et al., 1993), this section views children as active participants in culturally mediated learning processes rather than passive recipients of education. This view also challenges universalised notions of childhood (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a) and situates children's perspectives within the lived realities of Nepali classrooms. This emphasis on children's perspectives aligns with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which requires that children's views be given due weight in all matters affecting them (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

The invisible children: cultural expectations from Nepali children

Nepali society holds certain expectations regarding children. These ideas reflect widely held cultural expectations regarding children in Nepal, although they manifest across diverse communities in different ways.

- **The future's hope (*karnadhar*):** Children are seen as the 'chief navigator/architect' of the family's and nation's future, expected to achieve the prosperity and stability that the current generation could not. Their success in education is directly linked to collective honour.
- **The safety net:** They are the family's social and economic insurance. They are expected to provide practical and financial support in their youth and serve as the sole caretakers for their parents in old age.

- **The source of lineage (*Bansha*):** Children ensure the continuity of the family line, especially in patrilineal systems where the son is essential for name preservation and performing mandatory religious rites.

Therefore, many expectations are placed on children for their future; however, their present experiences are often overlooked. During a class discussion in my own teaching, a student asked: "Why is it that everyone thinks they are in a better position to make decisions for me, and yet I am the one who faces the consequences of these decisions?" This remark captures how children's experiences and voices remain overlooked in reforms that claim to empower them.

Children's educational experiences in Nepal

Children are central to Nepal's education reform discourse, yet there is a clear gap in the literature that engages with their lived experiences. Although they are seen as future contributors to the country's progress and are expected to embody democratic and social justice values (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022), their voices remain peripheral in policy and research. Much of the existing work about children is fragmented, reflecting a broader pattern in reform history in which ambitious policies overlook learners' everyday realities. This recurring disconnect contributes to what this thesis terms the karmic cycle of reform.

Understanding these lived experiences requires moving away from seeing children as passive recipients (Lundy, 2007). It is important to recognise children as active participants who co-construct knowledge with teachers, peers, family and cultural tools, even within constrained environments (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2003).

To contextualise this, it is useful to first understand how children are represented in the government's records (CEHRD, 2024). Tables *12*-*14* provide an overview of enrolment, progression, and learning patterns that reveal key system-level trends relevant to understanding children's everyday schooling experiences.

Table 12: Student enrolment by level and gender (2081 BS)

Level	Total Students	Girls	Boys	GPI
Basic (1–5)	3,514,928	1,670,143	1,844,785	0.91
Basic (6–8)	1,832,140	886,018	946,122	0.94

Level	Total Students	Girls	Boys	GPI
Secondary (9–10)	989,885	485,141	504,744	0.96
Secondary (11–12)	673,855	331,822	342,033	0.97
Total (1-12)	**7,010,808**	**3,373,124**	**3,637,684**	**0.93**

Table 13: Promotion, repetition and dropout rates

Grade	Promotion Rate			Repetition Rate			Dropout Rate		
	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total
G 1	77.2	78.6	78.0	13.8	12.3	13.0	9.0	9.1	9.1
G 2	82.6	83.0	82.8	8.7	7.9	8.3	8.7	9.1	8.9
G 3	84.4	84.7	84.6	7.6	6.8	7.1	8.0	8.5	8.3
G 4	84.7	84.3	84.5	7.3	7.4	7.4	8.0	8.3	8.1
G 5	86.8	86.4	86.6	7.0	6.8	6.9	6.3	6.8	6.6
G 1-5	82.9	83.1	83.0	9.1	8.4	8.7	8.0	8.4	8.2
G 6	87.8	86.3	87.0	6.0	6.7	6.4	6.2	7.0	6.6
G 7	88.3	86.6	87.4	5.4	6.0	5.7	6.3	7.4	6.9
G 8	87.5	87.9	87.7	9.8	9.1	9.4	2.7	3.0	2.9
G 6-8	87.9	86.9	87.4	7.1	7.3	7.2	5.0	5.8	5.4
G 1-8	85.4	85.0	85.2	8.1	7.9	8.0	6.5	7.1	6.8

Table 14: Snapshot of student learning achievement (2023/24)

Indicator	Value / Pattern
Grade 3 – English (National Mean)	49%
Grade 5 – English (National Mean)	51%
Grade 3 – Mathematics (National Mean)	47%
Grade 5 – Mathematics (National Mean)	45%
Urban-Rural Gap (English)	Urban students consistently score higher than rural students
Urban-Rural Gap (Mathematics)	Urban students consistently score higher than rural students
Province-level Differences	Provinces show wide variation in both English and Maths scores
School Type Differences	Institutional schools outperform community schools across both subjects
Gender Patterns	Girls and boys perform similarly, with slight variations by subject
Overall Pattern	Learning outcomes remain low and uneven across grades, regions, and school types

Table 12 shows that while overall enrolment is high, girls consistently remain slightly behind boys across levels. *Table 13* highlights persistent repetition and dropout rates, particularly in early grades, and *Table 14* shows that learning outcomes remain low and uneven across regions and school types. Taken together, these three tables outline system-level participation, progression and learning trends (CEHRD, 2024). However, they offer limited insight into the everyday teaching-learning realities that children navigate, negotiate, or make sense of. Lundy (2007) argues that participation is a right rather than an optional extra. It helps justify placing children at the centre of understanding the everyday pedagogical practices and experiences (UNICEF, 1990; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

In Nepal, regional disparities and material constraints shape classroom dynamics (Shields and Rappleye, 2008a). Children actively navigate these conditions daily, but this is not reflected in the data. According to government statistics (CEHRD, 2024), in 2081 BS (2024/25), more than seven million students were enrolled across basic and secondary levels, with most attending community schools (CEHRD, 2024). Gender parity has largely been achieved at the basic level but drops slightly in secondary grades (CEHRD, 2024).

Beyond these statistical patterns, deeper structural inequalities continue to shape the everyday realities learners navigate. One example is the uneven teacher–student ratio across regions. The national primary-level average of around 20.89 students per teacher masks significant disparities: ratios reach 38.69 in the *tarai* for Grades 6–8, compared with about 17.22 in the *pahad* region (CEHRD, 2024). These differences reflect broader inequities in teacher deployment and long-standing tensions between the *tarai* and the rest of the country (Hachhethu et al., 2008; Sijapati, 2012). They directly influence everyday classroom experiences, learning opportunities, and the feasibility of implementing LCE. To understand how these structural factors intersect with children's rights and lived realities, the next section examines the legal and policy frameworks governing child protection and school participation.

Children's rights in Nepal

Nepal's Constitution (Article 39) guarantees children's rights to education, protection, participation, and development, and these rights are reinforced by

the Act Relating to Children (2075 BS), which prohibits corporal punishment, exploitation, and discrimination in all settings (Government of Nepal, 2018). The Education Act (1971b) mandates child-friendly, learner-centred learning environments. It also directs the duties of teachers and the School Management Committees (SMC) to ensure the dignity and safety of all children (1971b).

Despite these legal protections, corporal punishment remains pervasive across schools in Nepal. UNICEF(2018) reports that more than 80% of children experience violent discipline, and recent media accounts describe severe cases requiring hospital care (Ray, 2025; Sangroula, 2023). Such practices are often justified by teachers and parents as necessary for discipline or shaping good character (Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Nepal, 2019), reflecting embedded cultural logics (Caddell, 2007b; Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017; Valentin, 2006). Weak enforcement means cases are frequently handled informally, avoiding legal consequences.

Additionally, schools do not meet basic safety requirements because of unsafe infrastructure, particularly in remote and flood-prone regions (USAID Nepal, 2019). Only a small proportion of schools meet child-friendly standards (UNICEF Nepal, 2018). These gaps illustrate the recurring divide between policy ambitions and classroom realities, aligning with the karmic cycle metaphor guiding this research. Although children's rights are embedded in policy (MoEST, 2021), these commitments rarely reflect how children's experiences are interpreted or acted upon in everyday school contexts.

To understand how these rights — particularly the right to be heard under Article 12 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1990; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009) — can be realised in practice, Lundy's (2007) model provides a useful framework.

Lundy's model of participation

Lundy's (2007) model builds on Article 12 of the UNCRC by showing that the right to express views cannot stand on its own. She breaks participation into four connected elements: children need space to contribute, support to voice their views, adults who are prepared to listen, and opportunities for those views to have influence. Together, these elements make the abstract principle of

participation more tangible and provide a practical framework. This helped my thinking about how learners experience LCE practices.

Figure 7: Lundy's model of participation (Welty and Lundy, 2013)

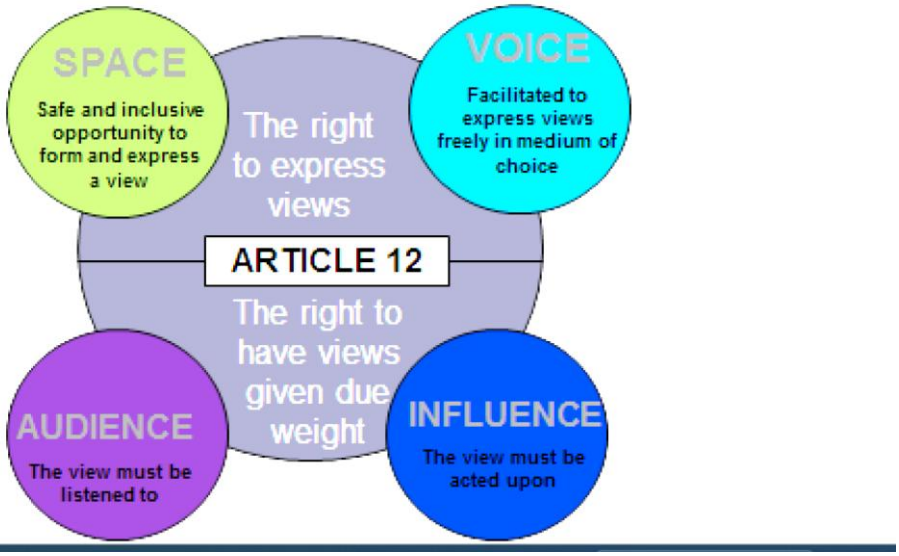


Figure 7 presents a visual representation of Lundy's (2007) model of participation. It shows the four interdependent components, Space, Voice, Audience and Influence that are required to realise Article 12 in practice (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). The diagram illustrates how these elements work together to ensure that children not only express their views but that these views are listened to and acted upon.

However, the model has limitations: it focuses primarily on individual voices and pays less attention to collective norms or to the power relations between adults and children. Yet it still helped shape how I engaged with children during fieldwork and how I thought about participation in everyday school settings.

This section illustrates how children occupy an important symbolic place in both Nepali cultural beliefs and in discourses on education policy reform. Culturally, they are valued as support systems and contributors to the future. Policy discourses, meanwhile, draw on the figure of the 'universal child' (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b), where children are represented through data on learning and achievement (Adamson and Brown, 2024; Brown, 2025). Both perspectives extract Nepali children from the cultural, social, and relational contexts in which they navigate everyday learning (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b). These different framings stem from various logics, but they still negate children's lived experiences. Emphasising this common disjunction is crucial here because it

illustrates why children's voices and perspectives are essential to understanding everyday teaching and learning in Nepali classrooms.

Missing depth of children's experiences

Although the literature is fragmented, there is consensus on the importance of ensuring that children's rights are guaranteed in Nepal. For instance, a report by (Poudel and Costley, 2023) examines barriers to implementing language policies and multilingualism in classrooms but does not include children as stakeholders or participants. Karki (2014, 2023) argues how children navigate family responsibilities, expectations and schooling, often as working children. Testimonies from the participants indicate that earning enough to support the family leaves little time for school (Karki, 2023). This study is one of the few that gives space to children's voices, deepening understanding of the tension between education and aspirations (Karki, 2014). Similarly, Koirala-Azad (2008), through Participatory Action Research with four higher education students, unpacks experiences of schooling and oppression. These studies are essential, yet they do not capture the everyday experiences of younger students interacting with pedagogical practices.

This fragmentation reflects a broader epistemological gap in educational research in Nepal, in which children are often positioned as objects of study rather than as subjects with agency (Valentine, 2011). As Liebel (2023) argues, children in the Global South are often excluded from knowledge production. This reinforces adultism assumptions and limits the transformative potential of education (Liebel, 2023). Additionally, this gap mirrors the broader pattern of reform in Nepal, where policies are repeatedly introduced with ambitious visions but fail to engage with learners' lived realities (Rappleye, 2019).

The absence of children's voices in both policy and research is not incidental but symptomatic of a system that continues to overlook those at the heart of education. These gaps can also be understood through the concept of the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019), which explains how educational practices and research priorities reinforce each other. Without deliberate action, these patterns keep children's viewpoints marginalised and sustain adult-focused narratives in policy and scholarship.

My research aims to expand on the limited existing literature regarding children's experiences by exploring learners' perspectives, experiences, and voices within their school environment. To achieve this, the focus is on understanding how children collaboratively construct knowledge through interaction (Rogoff, 2003). This approach aligns with the goal of understanding everyday pedagogical practices in Nepali classrooms.

Deconstructing the universal child

Building on a fragmented literature, it is essential to examine the assumptions that shape how children are portrayed in global and national education discourses. A dominant assumption is the notion of the 'universal child', a concept that positions all children as identical, erasing cultural and contextual differences (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a).

Grounding this study in context means recognising children's experiences within their social and cultural worlds (Lynch and Soni, 2021) and acknowledging that they actively shape these worlds. Yet, children in LICs are often reduced to data, survival rates, and enrolment figures rather than seen as individuals (Brown, 2025). This reflects a persistent belief that childhood is experienced uniformly across contexts (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a):

> *"In the North, and globalised through international development policies . . . the model of child development inscribes an ideal-typical white, middle-class childhood that is also culturally masculine, as indicated by the normative developmental trajectory from irrationality to rationality and from dependence to independence and autonomy." (Burman and Stacey, 2010, p. 230)*

In this view, the child is seen as "a universal subject; an abstracted entity that can be imagined and replicated across diverse social and cultural settings" (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a, p.6). It appears "natural and beyond culture; a subject that both seems fixed and coherent while also serving as a flexible signifier for various worldviews" (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016, p. 6). Removing specificities, this figure becomes "apolitical, ahistorical, and naturalised" (Baird, 2008, p.296). These ideas influence global documents such as the UNCRC (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016a) and Nepal's SESP (MoEST, 2022).

Such framings assume children share fixed qualities regardless of context, age, or gender (Githitho Muriithi, 2016; Nieuwenhuys, 2009). Rooted in shared humanism (Nieuwenhuys, 2009), they impose a common moral code for understanding childhood (Burman, 2016). This normative discourse shapes Nepal's reform agenda by positioning children as future contributors to national growth (MoEST, 2021, 2022). It emphasises their role in embodying democratic values as adults (MoEST, 2021, 2022), while overlooking their current realities (Hopkins, 2016). These patterns mirror the karmic cycle of reform, progressive language masking entrenched assumptions about childhood and learning.

Western norms of childhood (Baird, 2008; Burman, 2012; Burman and Stacey, 2010) reinforce deficit narratives, othering children who do not fit middle-class ideals (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b). Education reforms in Nepal have long aimed to socialise children into "responsible and productive national citizens who imbibe democratic and social justice values" (MoEST, 2022, p.21), perpetuating the faceless universal child discourse (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b). Schools become sites for shaping this ideal, emphasising play and discipline (Burman, 2012, 2016), and contrasting Global North narratives with LIC realities (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b).

Reasons why learning experiences are important

Recognising learners as active participants provides the basis for examining how pedagogical practices are experienced and negotiated in everyday classroom life. Two pieces of work guided my approach to understanding learners' experiences in this study. Eleanore Hargreaves' (2017) work addresses why learners' perspectives matter for understanding classroom life, while Laura Lundy's model (2007) demonstrates how participation can be realised in practice. One is grounded in classroom experience, the other in children's rights, and together they demonstrate why learners' voices are at the centre of this study and how their experiences can be meaningfully drawn on.

Hargreaves' (2017) work offers a helpful way of thinking about why learners' perspectives matter, even though her study is based in English classrooms. The points she raises speak clearly to the Nepali context, where children's voices remain under-represented (2019). Children can often identify what works and what does not, noticing aspects adults overlook (Hargreaves, 2017). Their

accounts open conversations about inclusion and the barriers that remain hidden without them (Ainscow and Messiou, 2018). Their reflections also strengthen their sense of agency and confidence (Hargreaves, 2017). Listening also involves rights: children have the right to share their perspectives on their learning (Hargreaves, 2017; Lundy, 2007). However, how these rights are implemented in practice depends on the cultural and social contexts within which they are embedded.

While the UNCRC itself draws on universal notions of childhood, the principles it sets out, particularly the right to be heard, remain important. In this study, these rights are understood within the cultural and social contexts that shape children's everyday experiences. This is important since schools mirror wider social norms and hierarchies (Harber, 2015a). Therefore, children's voices provide insights of how these dynamics are negotiated and manifested in everyday practice (Hargreaves, 2017).

Summary

This chapter demonstrates how teachers and children hold central yet often underrepresented positions within Nepal's educational landscape. Teachers are frequently depicted as responsible for reforming the education system, a view reinforced by cultural beliefs and public assumptions (Pradhan and Valentin, 2021). This is further reinforced by policy directives and global discourses (Sayed and Ahmed, 2015).

Meanwhile, children are situated through cultural expectations emphasising their future roles and policy narratives that depict them as a normative 'universal child' (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b). Such perspectives effectively extract the children from their cultural, social, and relational contexts, which they contend with daily in the classroom (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b) and in their everyday life, whereas in actuality learners actively negotiate and influence teaching and learning within their own contextual realities.

The core argument of the thesis is that without recognising and acting on teachers' realities and learners' lived experiences, reforms risk perpetuating a cyclical pattern where new policies are added to outdated assumption.

Tying Chapters 2 to 6 together: A Synthesis

Chapters 2 to *6* laid the theoretical foundation of the study by engaging in extensive literature around the different aspects underpinning this study. It was important to focus on the different components individually, as it enabled me to unpack each aspect before looking at how they interconnect and influence pedagogical practices. These aspects form a complex nexus that sustains and shapes the pedagogical practices and teaching styles discussed in the *Findings Chapters*, 8-11 and underpins the discussion in *Chapter 12*. I describe below how each of the chapters helped form the foundation on the basis of which the analysis emerged in Chapter 12.

Chapter 3 presented the theoretical lenses, the pedagogical nexus and the onto-cultural perspective used to examine teaching–learning processes in Nepali basic schools. These lenses form the study's theoretical backbone on the basis of which pedagogical practices, both the act of teaching and the discourse behind it (Alexander, 2000), are interrogated. It helped to shift the focus away from whether learner-centred approaches are simply present or absent, towards understanding how ideas about knowledge, authority, learning, and the self inform teachers' and learners' engagements with pedagogical reform. This paved the way for the emergence of the two styles of teaching, *guru* and *abhibhawak*, that emerged from the findings (*Chapter 12*), but used the same palette of practices. The combination of the lenses allows the unpacking of both the values and beliefs that drove practice (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017), but also how structural elements reinforced certain practices and beliefs, all of which were mutually reinforcing (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019).

Chapter 2 placed the study within Nepal's complex and evolving policy environment. It notes that although Nepal was never officially colonised, it participated in colonial activities (Pradhan and Valentin, 2021). The country still grapples with deep structural inequalities rooted in its highly diverse demographics, upheld by the dominant *bahun-chettri* hegemony, caste, and ethnic hierarchies (Bishwakarma, 2019; Gellner, 2016). Throughout the findings, the various ethnic worldviews are evident and how the notions around learning, success, obedience, and respect helped drive practice and interaction in class. This led to a constant negotiation of legitimising certain behaviour or assumptions around learning.

The chapter highlighted the disjuncture between policy mandates and vision (SSRP (2009-2016),SSDP(2016-2021), and SESP (2022-2032) and the implicit values and beliefs that drive the implementation of these policies. The analysis of the National Curriculum (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b) reveals discrepancies between policy intentions and their actual implementation, as the curriculum remains highly prescriptive and outcome-oriented, leaving limited space and agency for both learners and teachers. It is also reflective of what Nepali policymakers consider knowledge, so it reflects their values (Brinkmann, 2019). This shared value of importance placed on outcomes was evident across all findings chapters and discussed in the Discussion (*Chapter 12*).

To further understand these implicit values and beliefs, it was important to engage with discourses on indigenous and local knowledge to foreground local Nepali epistemologies. This included discussing the Hindu and Buddhist worldviews, the karmic cycle, and how the world is experienced in cycles rather than in a linear way. included. It helped set up the discussion and analysis (*Chapter 12*) of how the *guru* and *abhibhawak* teaching styles helped either perpetuate the existing karmic cycle of incomplete policy implementation or create openings for learning driven by relationality.

Since Nepal's education reform mandate is driven by global education goals (Regmi, 2017) and successive policies continue to implement LCE (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022), it became important to engage in the discourses around it to be able to unpack the aspirational visions and help set the context in which teaching-learning takes place. Therefore, Chapter 4 engaged with the theoretical discourses around LCE, its rationales being driven by cognitive, emancipatory and preparatory arguments behind championing LCE as a transformative reform agenda (Schweisfurth, 2013). However, as promising as it sounds, these ideals remain contested and difficult to define as they travel across contexts as a 'policy panacea' (Sriprakash, 2010). By presenting the ongoing critiques of LCE as a travelling policy, its ideologies and the multiple models around how LCE is conceptualised, I highlight how these reform policies are presented as seemingly straightforward, even at the discourse level, but are complex. And so it becomes imperative not to view pedagogical practices as an implementation outcome of the discourse, but rather to unpack it through the everyday negotiations and values that underpin it. This is why Schweisfurth's

(2013) Minimum Standards are used as an organising framework for practices, not to evaluate the implementation of LCE but to analyse everyday practices.

While studies in *Chapter 5* resonate with Nepal's challenges of implementing education reforms like LCE. It highlights the importance of understanding individual contexts and how pedagogical practices are shaped, negotiated, and experienced through everyday local lenses rather than grandiose policy expectations or assumptions. This is evident throughout the Findings Chapters (8-11) as well as in the discussion chapter.

Finally, *Chapter 6* presents the theoretical discourses around the central actors in enacting pedagogical practices, the teachers and students. By presenting a critique of the deficit narratives around teachers and the universal child notions, the chapter sets the stage to analyse pedagogical practices as they are negotiated, experienced and navigated by both the teachers and students. This chapter enables the discussion to build on challenging the deficit narrative around teachers and universalised notions around children. It helps lay the foundation to analyse practices in detail by looking at teacher experiences, structural contexts and how values and beliefs drive their practices. It creates space to move away from the notion of how children are simply reactors rather than active actors in shaping pedagogical practices. It also creates space to look at teachers and students shaping and negotiating pedagogical practices together.

These various influences discussed across the chapters together form a comprehensive backdrop for critically analysing everyday practices, negotiations, and the two distinct teaching styles, the *guru* and the *abhibhawak*, within the complex Nepali context, as presented in the findings (*Chapters 8–11*) and examined in the discussion (*Chapter 12*).

Chapter 7. Methodology

This chapter is organised in two main parts: the first outlines the study's methodology; the second presents the methods.

The methodology section begins by outlining the study's chosen research paradigm. It situates the study within an interpretivist framework informed by a critical lens. It then describes and discusses my ontological and epistemological assumptions. The section also introduces the Comparative Case Study (CCS) design (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023a) and its relevance for understanding complex, contextually embedded pedagogical practices in Nepal.

This section also operationalises the theoretical framework, which combines the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and the onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) to examine how pedagogical practices are shaped by relational, structural and cultural influences. The final part of the methodology presents a reflection on positionality that moves beyond the insider–outsider dichotomy. The second part of the chapter discusses the methods used for school and participant selection, data generation, and ethical considerations. This research was multifaceted, engaging with teachers' and learners' perceptions, experiences, practices and beliefs within everyday teaching and learning. My own experiences are deeply connected to these processes, and reflexivity becomes an integral part of the study (Braun and Clarke, 2022b).

Philosophical foundations of the study

Research paradigm

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm complemented by a critical perspective. This provided the philosophical foundation for understanding the complex, culturally situated nature of pedagogical practices (Tikly, 2025). This approach enabled exploration of these practices within the national, local, political, policy, donor-influenced, and cultural contexts of teachers' and learners' realities, values, perspectives, and cultures (Cohen et al., 2018). The study examined how teachers' existing beliefs and cultural contexts shaped their pedagogical practices (Alexander, 2000). These formed the basis for exploring

the extent to which the pedagogical practices could be situated within the LCE Minimum Standards (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Although the study is rooted in an interpretivist paradigm, it also incorporates a critical perspective. Understanding pedagogical practices, along with teacher and learner perspectives and how learning is shaped, requires acknowledging structural issues of power and inequality, which were extensively discussed in *Chapter 2*.

This is particularly important, as Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nation with deep-rooted contextual and structural inequalities (Parajuli et al., 2021; Phyak, 2022), including caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and religious differences. Understanding participants' experiences, therefore, involves reflecting on the power dynamics and structural inequalities that shape teachers' and students' experiences (Hammersley, 2018b; Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). This perspective helps the study further examine how participants navigated or reinforced the existing structures. However, the study does not intend to propose a change agenda (Braun and Clarke, 2022b), as that is beyond its scope. Consequently, the research design is not rooted in a critical paradigm. Thus, its paradigm remains interpretivist.

Ontology

I adopt a relativist ontological position in this study. This position recognises that 'reality' comprises multiple, socially constructed realities, each shaped by individuals' cultural backgrounds, histories, and interactions (Tikly, 2025). This aligns with an interpretivist worldview (Hammersley, 2013; Tikly, 2025), which assumes that 'reality' is culturally derived and historically situated and therefore is not objective or neutral (Tikly, 2025).

It is essential to understand the 'distinctive cultural character' of people's beliefs, attitudes, and practices, how they evolve over time and continue to reproduce their social worlds (Hammersley and Traianou, 2016). This aligns with the interpretivist premise that people experience and interpret the world differently, and therefore, no single, objective reality can be assumed (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Instead, the social world is understood as fluid, dynamic and continually constructed through interaction and subjective experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2022b; Yazan, 2015).

Importantly, a relativist ontology also requires recognising that the researcher is not separate from the meaning-making process. My presence, values, and perspectives influenced how realities were interpreted within this study (Braun and Clarke, 2022b).

Epistemology

The study adopts a constructivist epistemology, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and shaped by context (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Tikly, 2025). Qualitative research is about meaning and understanding meaning-making processes, viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated (Hammersley, 2013). Qualitative data analysis is about telling 'stories', about interpreting, and creating, not discovering the 'truth' that is 'out there' (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

A constructivist epistemology underpins the study's aim, which is to understand how pedagogical practices, learning experiences, and conceptions of knowledge are interpreted through the unique perspectives of teachers and students. In line with this stance, the study treats students' and teachers' accounts as interpretations formed through interaction within their sociocultural and policy contexts, and resists simplistic reductions of these accounts to single meanings (Lincoln and Guba, 2013).

Since the researcher is part of the meaning-making process, reflexivity is integral: my presence, values, and perspectives inevitably shaped how the study's knowledge was produced (Braun and Clarke, 2022a; Carpenter, 2018). Accordingly, the data in this study were generated rather than gathered (Schwandt, 2007), reflecting the co-constructed knowledge in interpretivist research (Schwandt, 2007).

Research design: Comparative Case Study (CCS)

The above philosophical assumptions informed my decision to adopt the Comparative Case Study (CCS) (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023a) as the study's research design. CCS is methodologically aligned with the study's ontological and epistemological assumptions. This enabled an exploration of teachers' and learners' experiences and beliefs as they engaged in classrooms governed by LCE reform mandates.

Justification for CCS

The study sought to explore the assumptions that influence pedagogical practices, learning, and experiences of both teachers and students. This entailed tracing patterns across pedagogical practices and contextual realities to help understand why practices take the form they do (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023a).

The research design needed to include an ethnographic component to capture lived experiences and perceptions of teaching and learning processes (Hammersley, 2018b; Lincoln and Denzin, 2018). It also needed to enable comparison across sites, allowing analysis of how personal, contextual and cultural factors interact and influence teaching-learning practices. This required attending to how policies and historical practices have interacted, influenced one another, and helped shape current realities (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, 2020; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023a). This aligns with CCS as a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a, 2017b; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023a).

CCS does not view culture as homogeneous and consistent even within the same nation-state boundary (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2014, 2017b). Rather, culture is treated as a fluid, complex, and ever-evolving phenomenon (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). This requires attention to how meanings are produced through interaction in different contexts (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). This is particularly important for this study, which took place across three schools in different regions of the country. This perspective on culture allowed me to pay close attention to contextual subtleties, especially given the diversity of Nepali society, which is characterised by multiple ethnic, linguistic, and caste distinctions (Pradhan, 2020b) (see *Chapter 2*).

Similarly, CCS "draws upon radical rethinking of context" (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, p. 11). Context is embedded in the larger 'scapes', influenced by historical, economic and social processes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). This produces what Bartlett and Vavrus (2017a) describe as 'fuzzy fields' where social worlds are shaped by communication networks and shared activities (ibid.). This also supports examining how power dynamics and competing priorities shape LCE reform implementation (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

Therefore, contexts are not "static, confined or deterministic within temporal and physical boundaries" (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, p. 12). Boundaries are continually (re)created through social interactions across space and time (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018). This reinforces the idea that context is not a passive backdrop but an active process shaping pedagogical practices and interactions (ibid.), a key idea for this study.

Building on this, CCS was chosen for investigating teachers' and learners' experiences and beliefs about pedagogical practices in classrooms governed by LCE reform mandates (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). This perspective directly addresses the study's research questions on how teachers and learners engage in the learning process, the existing pedagogical practices, and the meanings they attribute to these experiences. It also enabled examination of the non-linear reinterpretation and implementation of LCE reform policies (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018), a central feature of this study.

However, despite the CCS design's appeal, it is also important to consider its potential drawbacks. Criticism of CCS remains relatively limited, with Sakata et al. (2021) being among the few scholars who have raised concerns. They argue that the approach has not been "judiciously analysed, reapplied and refined … which reflects a need for greater academic scrutiny" (Sakata et al., 2021, p. 194). They further note that CCS prioritises comparisons across the three axes rather than at their intersection, suggesting that a more nuanced conceptualisation could strengthen the framework (ibid.). They also question the applicability of quantitative methods within CCS, given the limited discourse on how these can be incorporated (Sakata et al., 2021).

Although Sakata et al. (2021) raise important concerns, criticism of CCS remains relatively limited. Crucially, these critiques do not challenge the conceptual foundations of CCS, which prioritises "context, unpredictability, and co-contractedness of humans" (Sakata et al., 2021, p. 194). These principles underpin this study and its central role in shaping an active context (Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024), making CCS an appropriate choice despite these criticisms.

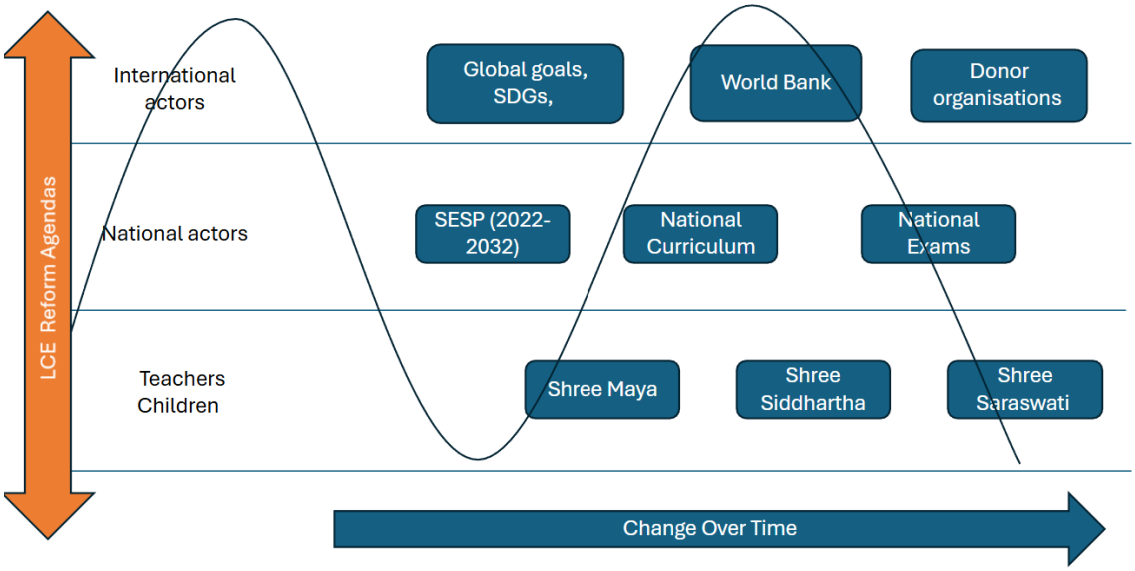
There are also practical reasons for choosing CCS as the research design for this study. It was flexible yet robust enough to meet the demands of the field (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023b). Its flexibility allowed aspects of the research design such as the sites, data generation methods and depth, to be adjusted as

the field's conditions changed (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023b). The design also permitted the addition of components to address specific issues as they emerged (Sikenyi, 2023). It did not require cases or comparisons to be conducted under rigid pre-stated conditions (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023b). This made it particularly suitable for pedagogical and classroom-level research (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b) and well-suited to my fieldwork.

Comparison through different axes

CCS's major strength is its dynamic multi-sited and multi-scaled approach to comparison, tracing how phenomena shift across time and space along intersecting axes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a, 2017b). *Figure 8* visualises this design by showing three intersecting axes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). The horizontal axis compares pedagogical practices across the three schools. The vertical axis traces policy influences from global to local levels, and the transversal axis captures the temporal evolution of LCE reforms.

Figure 8: Comparison through different axes (Adapted from Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017, p.3)



The horizontal axis of comparison

This study's horizontal axis examines how LCE policies manifest across different socially constructed locations that may appear quite similar on the surface, i.e., the three participating schools (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023b). It adopted a 'nested' homologous unit of comparison to examine how pedagogical practices were appropriated and shaped by contextual, cultural, structural, and policy

factors (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, p. 52). Comparison occurred across lessons and classes within schools, as well as across schools as whole units operating under LCE reform mandates.

These comparisons were made across "equivalent units of analysis", namely schools (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, p. 52). The analysis also focused on each school's distinctive contextual circumstances (ibid.). This necessitated careful attention to how "historical and contemporary processes have influenced and continue to shape the schools, the teachers and the students" (ibid.).

This axis requires a rich description of each unit of comparison (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). Accordingly, the study generated 'thick' and 'rich' data (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b; Geertz, 2008) through ethnographic approaches supported by prolonged immersion in the schools.

The vertical axis of comparison

The vertical axis examines how actors respond to policy within the 'same' culture, specifically LCE reform mandates, across local, national, and international levels (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2020; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023b). It examines how LCE was promoted by international Organisations (IOs) such as UNESCO and the World Bank, and how it entered national education discourse. Additionally, the vertical axis provided space to analyse how actors navigate structural and power dynamics, including the influence of "histories of racial, ethnic or gender policy in their communities" (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, p. 76).

The study examined how recent policies such as the National Curriculum, the SESP (MoEST, 2022), the Education Act (1971b), and the Teacher Service Code (TSC) (2000) conceive of LCE and how these interact with schools, teachers, and learners in everyday practice. I also examined the officially prescribed Nepali subject textbooks currently used in the classrooms at the study sites to understand how curricular expectations were operationalised in classroom materials. In addition, I have also referred to provisional laws where appropriate. The policies used across the Findings chapters have all been discussed in *Chapter 2* as part of the context, and this allowed for the development of the vertical axis, while the laws and mandates on corporal punishment have been discussed in both *Chapters 2* and *6*.

The vertical comparison also explores how teachers and students engage with, reinforce, or challenge pedagogical practices, focusing on their perspectives. This comparison spans from the micro to the macro levels (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a, 2017b) highlighting how policy discourses shape, and are reshaped by, classroom realities.

The transversal axis of comparison

The transversal axis is the final comparison dimension linking the horizontal and vertical axes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a). It involved tracing how Nepal's education system was conceptualised over time, including which forms of knowledge were legitimised and promoted (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). The focus was on examining the values and norms embodied by the national education system over the last twenty years, during which LCE was implemented. Attention to the historical context of LCE reforms provided insight into how current practices were shaped (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2020; Toukan, 2023). This helped interrogate how values and norms shaped pedagogical practices and why LCE reforms manifest differently across schools, contexts, and over time.

This axis captures shifting values and belief systems, particularly between teachers and students. Being embedded in the schools revealed underlying assumptions and highlighted multiple, at times conflicting, interpretations of teaching and learning practices (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). The transversal axis further extends the focus on temporality, tracing how practices, meanings, and reform narratives evolve and shift over time rather than being fixed (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). The manifestation of the transversal axis is the continuation or disruption of the karmic cycles discussed in *Chapter 12*.

Operationalising the theoretical framework components for the study

The research design is underpinned by a theoretical framework, which is operationalised throughout the study but particularly in the analysis stage. The pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and the onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) (see *Chapter 3*), are central to this. To analyse the complex interplay of structural constraints, relational norms, and cultural expectations shaping pedagogical practices, the study combined both lenses. They offered a coherent way to interpret how

structural, cultural, and relational influences interacted and guided the analytic focus.

These lenses were iteratively adapted to the Nepali context to explore how cultural logics, local histories, and social hierarchies shaped pedagogical practices. Schweisfurth's Minimum Standards (MS) (2013) served as an organising framework to locate existing pedagogical practices within the loosely framed expectations of policy mandates of LCE reforms.

Table 15 illustrates how these lenses were translated into practical categories for analysis, allowing a systematic comparison of structural and cultural factors. Presenting the pedagogical nexus alongside the onto-cultural perspective highlights their intersection and provides an interpretive framework for examining classroom practices and experiences. The pedagogical nexus identifies which practices are stabilised, while the onto-cultural perspective explains how these practices are made meaningful and legitimate to teachers and learners. Used together, they capture both stable classroom routines and the deeper cultural logics that sustain them.

Table 15: Operationalising the pedagogical nexus and the onto-cultural perspective

<table>
<tr><th>Pedagogical nexus</th><th colspan="2">Onto-cultural perspective</th></tr>
<tr><td>Stable mutually reinforcing factors</td><td>Teachers' cultural logic</td><td>Students' cultural logic</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Teacher student relationship</td><td>Beliefs about what a teacher /student is is/characteristics of an ideal teacher/student.</td><td>Beliefs about what a student/ teacher is, characteristics of an ideal teacher/student.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Beliefs about what discipline is and entails.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Beliefs about what constitutes authority, obedience, and respect, as well as how they can be expressed.
Beliefs about compliance and the administration of punishments.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">The textbook</td><td>Views and beliefs on its role in structuring lessons and guiding pedagogy, and expectations of ideal student engagement with texts.</td><td>Perception of learning and how they view the textbook and learning, and teachers' teaching style in relation to the textbook.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Beliefs about what is considered learning.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Examination and assessment</td><td>Beliefs about student success indicators and the legitimacy of exams.</td><td>Beliefs about achievement, exam performance and expectation of teacher support.</td></tr>
</table>

Pedagogical nexus	**Onto-cultural perspective**	
Education policy reforms	Beliefs and opinions regarding the envisioned reforms, their goals, directives, and applicability.	Perceptions of policy reforms and experiences of how it has changed their learning.
Structural inequalities	Perception and understanding of structural inequalities/caste, ethnicity and managing systematic constraints.	
	Cultural assumptions about fairness, opportunity.	
	Beliefs shaped and influenced by wider cultural norms and shared social expectations that extend beyond individual experiences.	

The pedagogical nexus captures the structural and relational factors that shape pedagogical practices (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). Elements such as the textbook, the teacher-student relationship, examinations, and assessment were adapted from Hufton and Elliot's (2000) theorisation of the pedagogical nexus (*Chapter 3*). These elements were also deemed important, stable factors in the Nepali context, as evidenced in prior studies (Caddell, 2006, 2007a; Thebe Limbu, 2021), policy (SESP, 2021), and reports (MoEST, 2021; USAID Nepal, 2019). Education policy reforms and structural inequalities are integral to the contextual realities of the Nepali education landscape (Parajuli and Onta, 2021; Shields and Rappleye, 2008a).

As shown in *Table 15*, the onto-cultural perspective centres the cultural beliefs of both the teachers and students. The elements listed in the table reflect the cultural beliefs that build on Rappleye and Komatsu's (2017) theorisation. It expands into the individual components of what a teacher and a student believe to be ideal, the relationship, what respect, authority, obedience, and discipline entail, how punishment is used and perceived, and the indicators of success and the perception of learning. It includes beliefs about policy reforms as well as the persisting structural inequalities.

Both the research design and the operationalisation of the theoretical lenses provide a structure for interpreting pedagogical practices, experiences, and perceptions of both learners and teachers. It is important to acknowledge that, given the nature of the study, fieldwork was not a neutral process (Tikly, 2025). Rather, the focus was on collaborating with participants and co-constructing experiences and shared meaning to generate data. Subsequently, my positionality also influenced data generation, shared experiences, and data

interpretation. The following section reflects on my positionality and reflexivity, and how they shaped the research.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

> "As qualitative researchers, what stories we are told, how they are relayed to us, and the narratives that we form and share with others are inevitably influenced by our position and experiences as a researcher in relation to our participants." (Greene, 2014, p. 1)

Building on the interpretivist assumptions of this study, positionality and reflexivity were central to the research design (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b; Cohen et al., 2018). My physical presence in the community embedded me within the context and shaped how meaning was co-constructed. However, my positionality was not fixed: it was fluid and continually negotiated throughout the research process. This discussion draws on the idea of the 'liquid in-betweener' (Barnes, 2023) to capture the permeability of my roles and relationships in the field, reflecting the interpretivist worldview that knowledge is situated and co-created (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). This helps establish the research's sincerity and rigour (Carpenter, 2018; Tracy, 2010).

Challenging the insider-outsider dichotomy

I naively entered the field thinking I would be both an insider and an outsider. I expected it to be easy to navigate the two roles (Toy-Cronin, 2018). Insider research occurs when the researcher shares the same identity, language, and experiences as the study participants (Delamont and Atkinson, 2018). This helps the researcher gain increased legitimacy and access to participants (Chavez, 2008; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). But it also brings complexities (Greene, 2014; Toy-Cronin, 2018). Researchers often have to manoeuvre "with role conflict if they find themselves caught between loyalty tugs and behavioural claims" (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007, p. 170). I often grappled with competing expectations: the academic standards set by the university and literature, and the relational expectations from participants and my own sense of responsibility. These tensions made it difficult to remain a 'neutral' researcher or an objective bystander (Carpenter, 2018).

An outsider researcher enters the field without preconceived notions, allowing participants to elaborate without assuming that one understands (Brannick and

Coghlan, 2007). It also allows the researcher to notice aspects that may otherwise go unnoticed (Toy-Cronin, 2018). However, as an outsider, it becomes difficult to gain trust and acceptance from participants, and they may hold back certain important experiences (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). In my case, I was an outsider in the school context, not part of the community, and also in my higher education experiences and cosmopolitan perspective.

Although the insider–outsider binary is a useful starting point, there is consensus that it often does not account for shifting identities (Milligan, 2016). Such a dichotomous view can ignore contextual realities (Milligan, 2016). This is why I adopted the 'liquid in-betweener' positionality in the research (Barnes, 2023), which shaped my approach.

Identity, beliefs, and worldviews: A Nepali researching the Nepali context

As Naveed et al. (2017) argue, exploring one's own context requires navigating cultural realities while aiming to meet the 'standards' of Western higher education. To begin with, I was an insider as "aspects of a researcher's self or identity are aligned or shared with participants" (Chavez, 2008, p. 475). This is because I am a Nepali woman born and raised in Nepal. I belong to the *Bahun-Chettri* caste/ethnicity, a dominant group in Nepal. My family's background has provided me with significant social and cultural capital, and it is important for me to acknowledge this.

I attended a private school in Kathmandu and lived in several countries in Southern Africa as a child. Later, I pursued higher education abroad. These experiences introduced me to various cultural and educational systems, alternative lifestyles, cultural beliefs, and diverse practices. Consequently, I have become more reflective and possibly more critical about myself and my Nepali identity and culture. Thus, my experiences are those of an insider, but not wholly (Chavez, 2008; Milligan, 2016).

I had prior knowledge and understanding of the Nepali education system, having worked as a high school teacher and in other capacities in the sector (Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014). This experience helped me to be accepted into the schools (Robinson-Pant, 2005). Over time, I became aware of the existing contextual realities and tensions between teachers and policymakers. Working closely with

children made me realise that they are not passive; they actively negotiate and shape the learning processes and experiences.

I am also aware of the power relations within the education system and society at large. This includes how certain knowledge is subject to more hegemonic control and is perceived as more legitimate, while other knowledge is ignored (Phyak, 2021b). This awareness, shaped by both professional and personal experiences, informed my reflexivity throughout the study.

Navigating the messiness of being in the field

In this section, I will reflect solely on the roles I assumed as a researcher. *Figure 9* illustrates my experiences in the field.

***Figure 9**: An image representing the positionality that I presented at a conference. A friend created it.*



I entered the field with particular expectations shaped by the university's research rigour and methodological standards (Naveed et al., 2017). In practice, I found myself navigating multiple, often unanticipated, roles within the schools. Lizzie Milligan's (2016) concept of the 'inbetweener', where the researcher can "make active attempts to place themselves in between" (p.248), was

particularly useful in helping me reflect on my experiences and positionality. She emphasised the importance of trust between her and the participants in co-constructing and generating knowledge during research together (Milligan, 2016).

Part of being accepted into the school was forming genuine relationships, not just through 'rapport building' (McMahon and Milligan, 2023; Robinson-Pant and Wolf, 2016). In the three schools, I was taken on as a staff member, a substitute teacher, a counsellor, and a PE teacher. I was even asked to help organise and write official letters on behalf of the school. Many of the participant teachers (particularly female teachers) and students often shared personal stories and sought my advice on teaching strategies, reflecting the depth of trust and collaboration that developed.

This engagement deepened my understanding of the contextual realities and created more space to explore issues, and to witness and be part of interactions in the schools. Here, reflexivity was key not only to tracking my thoughts but also to reflecting on how I switched between roles and how this influenced the data generation process (Gillam and Guillemin, 2018; Naveed et al., 2017). These tensions shaped my reflexive stance and methodological choices (Gillam and Guillemin, 2018).

These experiences reinforced the interpretivist premise that research is co-constructed within power-laden, culturally situated contexts (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023b). Acknowledging these tensions enabled me to critically examine my assumptions and ensure transparency in the generation of meaning throughout the study.

Therefore, my positionality in this study is most closely aligned with 'liquid in-between' (Barnes, 2023). These identities were not static: I was not just a researcher; I was a staff member and a friend. My positionality was permeable and fluid (Barnes, 2023). This flexible stance helped me gain insider trust while maintaining sufficient distance to analyse practices critically through reflexivity, including attention to power dynamics. This helped ensure transparency and integrity (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Tracy, 2010) during the shared experiences, data generation, and analysis processes.

Methods

Although the study is not completely ethnographic, it is informed by its principles of prolonged immersion, attention to everyday practice, and reflexive engagement (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). These principles helped generate 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 2008) for the horizontal axis of the CCS design. This depended on detailed, situated accounts of teaching and learning across the three participating schools.

The next section explains how the study was conducted in practice. It outlines how access and relationships were established in each school, the ethical procedures that shaped the work, and the ways in which data were generated through prolonged immersion in the field. In line with Hammersley's (2013) emphasis on the 'reflexive' nature of social inquiry, the focus here is on the depth of social interaction rather than the breadth of statistical data. This section then introduces the participants and field sites before detailing the analytic approach.

Selection of study schools and shaping of cases

This section outlines how the cases were selected and the decision-making process behind choosing these schools and participants.

The study aimed to explore and understand teaching and learning practices and experiences. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 5, research in education in Nepal is fragmented and rarely examines classroom practices (Caddell, 2005). This study therefore required data generation over an extended period across multiple schools to enable comparisons and to understand how contextual realities shape pedagogical practice (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). Including schools in different locations was important for exploring how local contexts intersect with teachers' and students' experiences and perceptions of learning.

The minimum criteria for selecting schools were that they had to be basic community schools with varied performance levels, and they needed to be willing to accommodate my extended presence of eight to ten weeks and collaborate in generating data through multiple methods. These broad criteria avoided strict filtering, as the CCS design assumes that contextual realities continue to evolve and influence teaching and learning processes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

The locations were selected for both practical and conceptual reasons. I chose the three sites based on the schools' availability during term time, which varies regionally. The seasonal and weather patterns also influenced my choice by shaping my travel options. Conceptually, selecting basic schools was appropriate as LCE reforms are assumed to begin with younger children (MoEST, 2022). A multi-sited design was therefore necessary to trace the CCS axes of comparison.

To gain access to schools, I collaborated with an NGO I had previous contact with, which had established relationships in the communities. They served as gatekeepers (Hammersley, 2018b), introducing me to several basic community schools across the Kathmandu Valley, Baglung, and Kapilvastu (see *Figure 10*). Their involvement helped legitimise my presence when approaching school leaders.

Figure 10: Map of Nepal and the locations of the three schools



I visited multiple schools across the three locations and held initial conversations with principals and teachers to explain my research and fieldwork plans.

The final schools were selected based on their willingness to host an extended presence and facilitate interaction with teachers and students. I selected three community schools as cases: one in Kathmandu, one in the *tarai* region near the Indian border, and one in the upper hills of western Nepal. These schools represent urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts. Understanding these contexts

is crucial for interpreting pedagogical practices and positioning the cases within the CCS design's comparative logic (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a, 2018).

- **Kathmandu Valley: Shree Maya**

Location context: Kathmandu Valley

The district where the first school is located is within the Kathmandu Valley, one of the country's largest economic centres. As in the rest of the valley, the *Newar*s are the indigenous population (see *Chapter 2*). The valley has undergone rapid urbanisation, resulting in significant demographic diversity. The district has experienced extensive internal migration as people move in search of better employment, healthcare facilities, and educational opportunities.

The valley has the highest concentration of private schools (institutional schools), ranging from elite institutions to budget schools (Bhatta and Pherali, 2017). As a result, community schools often struggle to maintain student populations (Pradhan, 2019; Valentine, 2011). Additionally, many students enrolled in community schools come from economically disadvantaged households and are among the most vulnerable groups in the country.

These demographics, competing school options, and socio-economic pressures directly influence how cultural dynamics, reform expectations, and marginalisation shape teaching-and learning processes in Shree Maya.

School context: Shree Maya

Shree Maya is located in one of the districts in the Kathmandu Valley. The school was founded by Buddhist nuns and openly practises Buddhism, including Saturday Buddhism classes. The nuns live on the school premises, although they are not very visible during school hours. Children "rescued from difficult conditions" often live with the nuns, and the assumption is that girls who stay eventually become nuns. The maintenance staff's family also lives on the premises. The school is also supported by various NGOs through programmes such as teacher training and awareness drives.

The school has approximately 250 students from grades 1–12. I worked primarily with children in grades one to four (32 students). The staff includes 15 teachers and three support personnel. Staff attributed low student enrolment to limited community trust and the school's weak performance.

The school consists of three attached buildings. The main building houses the office, principal's room, computer lab, and library. There are separate toilets for staff and students, where teachers' were clean and the student toilets often lacked running water.

Lower-primary classes are located on the ground floor. Classrooms have rows of benches, some broken but still in use, with learning materials displayed on the walls. These rooms seldom receive sunlight, making them cold and damp in winter. Other grades are distributed across the remaining floors, with several classrooms poorly lit. The staffroom has a single large desk and personal lockers and was usually quiet, with teachers working or using their phones.

Students at Shree Maya come from socially and economically marginalised backgrounds. All the students I collaborated with also worked after school, selling vegetables, working in small eateries, or doing domestic work. According to the principal, most children came from "broken or uneducated families". Teachers frequently described how many students were victims of domestic violence and difficult home circumstances. Several children shared that their fathers beat them. These conditions shaped both children's learning experiences and teachers' concerns about managing behaviour.

- **Kapilvastu: Shree Siddhartha**

Location context: Kapilvastu

Kapilvastu district is located in Nepal's western *tarai*, a low-lying, fertile plain. The school is in one of the towns in this province near the Indian border. The area is historically significant as it is believed to be the birthplace of Buddha, who spent part of his early life here. The landscape is flat and agriculturally rich, shaping livelihoods and mobility within the district.

The population living in the town of Kapilvastu is highly heterogeneous. It has a mixture of Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists along with *Pahadi (Bahuns, Chettris*, *Dalits*)[3], *Madhesi*[4] Hindus *(Bahuns, Chettris, Dalits),* and *Madhesi* Muslims who

[3] They are people who migrated from the hills. They have retained their cultural and ethnic identities despite living in the *tarai* region and make up and identify with the dominant political ruling class Nepali is the national language that has in turn helped perpetuate the continued status quo (Pherali and Garratt, 2014)

[4] Madhesis are people who live in the flat lands (*tarai*). They make up a heterogenous group consisting of Hindus, Muslims, *Tharus* and other indigenous groups who do not speak Nepali as their native language. Furthermore, there is constant tension where the tarai/*Madhes* region

speak *Awadhi*, *Tharus* who speak *Tharu bhasa*[5] *(see Chapter 2)*. This creates a multilingual, multi-ethnic environment that influences social interaction and teaching-learning processes.

Migration patterns also shape the area. Cross-border mobility is common, as Nepal and India share an open border. Some teachers referenced rising religious tensions across the border, which influenced their views on schooling and identity. Unlike Kathmandu, there are fewer private schools. Community schools are heavily populated, and children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds attend the same schools.

School context: Shree Siddhartha

The school is spread across a large area. The campus consists of older and newer buildings arranged around a central courtyard. A temple and a large Buddha statue are visible from most parts of the school. Basic facilities such as toilets and the canteen are located at the far end of the campus. As in Shree Maya, students often complained about the lack of running water in student toilets, while the toilets that teachers used were clean.

The staffroom has a large rectangular table and individual lockers for teachers. The walls display the teachers' code of conduct and the national anthem. Classrooms are large, with high ceilings and attached benches arranged in rows. Seating arrangements vary depending on the number of students. Rooms have whiteboards and stands for teachers' books.

The student population is diverse. There are approximately 1,500 students up to grade 12, with 683 in basic school. Staff spoke extensively about the challenges of managing large student numbers, which affected exam results. There were 30 teachers and one support staff member. Teachers reported that many students transferred from private schools after grade five.

Most of the students attending the school were *Madhesi* but belonged to different ethnic and religious groups (see descriptions in *Chapter 2*). Many Muslim students attended both this school and madrasas. There was no visible

express their dissatisfaction towards their treatment, they state that the ruling class systematically others them in all aspects (Sijapati, 2012)

[5] The *Tharus* are a group of people who inhabit the western *tarai* of Nepal, an area which is low-lying, hot and humid, and fertile. They speak a language called *Tharu bhasa*, which is classified as a member of the Indo-European language family

NGO presence during fieldwork, aside from routine government health programmes. According to the principal, the school received informal parental contributions, despite regulations prohibiting such payments. Lunch money for marginalised groups was distributed directly to families rather than used for meals, as the schools cited their inability to prepare meals for such a high number of students.

- **Baglung: Shree Saraswati**

Location context: Baglung

Shree Saraswati is located in Baglung district in a hill village (*pahad*) approximately thirty kilometres from the district headquarters. Baglung district is in Gandaki Province, in Nepal's western hills. The district is known for its cultural diversity and rugged landscape.

The indigenous ethnicity, *Magars*[6], make up the largest group at 29% (National Statistics Office, 2023). This is followed by *Pahadi Bahuns*, *Chettris* and *Dalits, Tamangs*[7] and *Thakalis*[8]. Baglung district is known for its high migration because the *Magars* have historically served in the British and Indian armies for generations as Gurkha soldiers (National Statistics Office, 2023). Community members explained that it is common for grandparents to live with their young grandchildren while parents work abroad. The population is experiencing a sharp decline due to low birth rates and high emigration (National Statistics Office, 2023).

The village is situated high in the hills and connected by a winding road that had only recently been opened. The settlements span multiple hills, with approximately 250 households. Ethnic groups often live in clusters. Homes and farmland are scattered across steep terrain, and most families keep livestock such as buffalo, goats, and chickens. Children often spend mornings herding animals or collecting firewood before walking between twenty minutes and one hour to school.

[6] Magars are considered indigenous to Nepal. They have mythical stories of their ancestry. Their native language is *Magar* which is Sino-Tibetan language.
[7] Another indigenous ethnic group who are of Tibeto-Burman descent.
[8] They are also of Tibeto-Burman ethnic group but have different cultural traditions and language.

School context: Shree Saraswati

Shree Saraswati is a basic school that runs classes from ECED (nursery) to grade eight. It serves 32 students, with 8 teaching staff and 2 maintenance staff. The staff consists of a mix of ethnicities, including *Dalit*, *Bahun* (both *Pahadi* and *Madhesi*), *Chettri*, and *Magar*. Like Shree Maya, the school's low enrolment was a concern among staff and was seen as an indicator of poor quality.

The school was established in 1988 and sits on a rolling hill, with several small buildings spread across the hillside. The buildings are made from brick, rock, and mud. A small temple is located in the courtyard shared by several grades. The main building has the staff room/principal's office and the library. Other classrooms are located in small permanent and temporary structures, some of which are in poor condition. As with the other two schools, the children's toilets are dirty and lack running water. The staff toilet, on the other hand, which is further down the hill, is clean but has no running water. Most classrooms have basic furniture, minimal learning materials, and mud floors. Many spaces are poorly lit and cold. Classroom codes of conduct are displayed on walls, but facilities are limited.

Students at Shree Saraswati are closely connected to the surrounding community. Most children come from families who have remained in the village despite high emigration rates. All children carry out household chores in the morning, including tending livestock and collecting firewood, before arriving at school. Some walk an hour to school, while others walk twenty to thirty minutes.

The presence of donors was evident. Room to Read built a library that was not used, and another private donor helped build a computer lab, but the equipment was nonfunctional. The school also partnered with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), which provided stationery, clothes, and school bags to selected marginalised children. Community members occasionally donate small amounts of money in remembrance of family members or on special occasions. These donations are informal, unstructured, and usually announced publicly by the principal. Teachers described ongoing financial difficulties.

These descriptions provide the empirical basis for the horizontal axis of the CCS design, enabling comparison across socially constructed yet comparable sites

that are homologous yet nested within wider, changing contexts (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

By outlining the contextual realities of Shree Maya, Shree Siddhartha, and Shree Saraswati, this section supports analysis of how teaching and learning are experienced across and within these settings, thereby forming the horizontal axis of comparison. These contextual details also inform the vertical and transversal axes by situating how policy dynamics and reform trajectories are experienced and negotiated within each school (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

Participant selection

Teachers and students were informed about the study through information sessions, and participation was voluntary, based on ongoing permission and consent.

The selection of participants was driven by the need to address the study's research questions, which required insight into the everyday experiences, practices, and beliefs of those directly involved in the basic-level teaching–learning process in Nepali community schools. Generating 'thick' and 'rich' situated descriptions for the horizontal axis required a prolonged engagement with teachers and students (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, 2020).

The criteria for selecting teachers and students were broad and intentionally flexible to remain aligned with CCS.

- Teachers needed to be actively teaching at the basic education level (grades one to eight), present during lessons, and willing to reflect on their teaching. The teachers could hold any form of employment contract (see *Chapter 6* for details on teacher contracts). While the 22 teachers provided formal, verbal or signed consent, the student data were generated through a 'naturalistic' ethnographic flow (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). See *Table 16* for an overview of participants across the three schools.

Table 16: Overview of participants across the three schools

School name (changed)	Total teaching staff	Total student enrolment	Student participating groups
Shree Maya	8	32	Grades 1-4
Shree Siddhartha	7	683	Grades 1-8
Shree Saraswati	7	29	Grades 1-8
Total	**22**		

- Student participants had to be between six and fourteen years old and taught by the participating teachers. Students needed to feel comfortable engaging in activities and conversations over an extended period, as their reflections were integral to understanding their learning experiences. As ethnographic approaches are central to this study's research design, participation was fluid, relational, and varied over time and activity (Delamont and Atkinson, 2018).

  It is therefore essential to distinguish total school enrolment from those students whose contributions formed the dataset. Total enrolment, particularly the 683 students at Shree Siddhartha (see *Table 16*), illustrates the scale and social density of the setting, not the number of participants (Fetterman, 2020b). In line with ethnographic practice, different children were involved in the data-generating processes at different times, depending on their interests, availability, and comfort (Hammersley, 2019). Consequently, the dataset includes only those students who actively engaged during Activity With Students (AWS) or conversations.

  This strategy aligns with the BERA (2024) guidance on proportionate and process-led ethics, which recognises children's capacity to provide informed consent. By prioritising meaningful, relational engagement over quantification of the student body, this study does not claim or require universal individual consent from the entire student population, but focuses on those whose voices directly inform the data.

Although the selection criteria were consistent across all three schools, the teachers and students I engaged with varied according to each school's structure, population, and contextual realities. Teachers acted as gatekeepers, granting access to specific groups, and engagement was shaped by grade

availability, school routines, and how teachers integrated me into classroom life (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Participation remained voluntary throughout with students opting in and out as they pleased, shaped by learners' comfort, availability, and the relational nature of the study (García and Fine, 2018; Joerdens, 2014).

- **Shree Maya**

At Shree Maya, I worked closely with teachers and students up to grade four. Seven teachers, who consented verbally, in writing, or both, invited me to observe lessons and participate in classroom activities. They also created opportunities for collaboration by asking me to fill in lessons when they were unavailable. Their practices and experiences influenced the teaching–learning environment in the lower grades. See *Table 17* for a description of teacher participants.

Table 17: Teacher participants in Shree Maya

Name (Changed)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	No. of years	Teacher type
Aasma	Female	33	Madhesi Chettri	6	Rahat Darbandi (Relief quota)Teachers
Tenzin	Male	38	*Sherpa*	1	Permanent teacher
Subhas	Male	40	*Newar*	5	Permanent teacher
June	Female	55	*Newar*	30	Temporary
Aarati	Female	47	*Newar*	25	Temporary
Sneha	Female	35	*Newar*	10	Rahat Darbandi (Relief quota) teachers
Rashmee	Female	27	*Bahun*	15	Temporary
Bipana	Female	30	*Chhetri*	8	Temporary

Students from grades one to four took part in conversations and creative activities over the eight-week period. During the two-week winter break, I was asked to work with 20 students who needed additional support in literacy and numeracy skills. Although intended for 20 students, attendance regularly exceeded this number. I conducted four-hour sessions that combined remedial work using their school textbooks with a range of activities designed to generate data for the study. The sessions were held from Monday to Friday from 10 AM to 2 PM. Conversations and reflections unfolded continuously throughout our time together, rather than within discrete time slots.

- **Shree Siddhartha**

At Shree Siddhartha, I worked with teachers and students across the full range of basic-level classes. Seven teachers participated in the study and invited me to observe lessons, spend time in their classrooms, and engage in conversations and interviews about their teaching practices. All participating teachers consented either verbally or in writing.

I was given opportunities to work with the children and generate data by being permitted to fill in lessons when teachers were unavailable. I was able to use this time flexibly to generate data by collaborating with students across grades through conversations during breaks and creative tasks. See *Table 18* for a detailed description of teacher participants.

***Table 18**: Teacher participants in Shree Siddhartha*

Name (Changed)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	No. of years	Teacher type
Omkar	Male	38	*Madhesi Chettri*	3	Permanent
Shankhar	Male	25	*Madhesi Dalit*	1	Permanent
Kopila	Female	35	*Madhesi Chettri*	15	Local teacher
Namrata	Female	55	*Madhesi Chettri*	30	Temporary
Nafisa	Female	52	*Muslim*	28	Permanent
Samita	Female	35	*Pahadi (hill) Bahun*	12	Local teacher
Kamal	Male	33	*Pahadi (hill) Chettri*	2	Permanent

Due to the school's large student population and multiple sections after grade six, my interactions with students varied by class size and availability. Nonetheless, I engaged with whole classes from grades one to eight through classroom observations, shared activities, and informal conversations during the school day. Participation was based on students' willingness to engage.

- **Shree Saraswati**

At Shree Saraswati, I worked across grades one to eight, reflecting the school's small size and close-knit community. I collaborated with all seven teachers who consented either verbally or in writing, conducting classroom observations, supporting lessons, and engaging in extended conversations and interviews at school and, in some cases, in their homes on weekends. *Table 19* details the teachers who participated in the study.

Table 19: Teacher participants in Shree Saraswati

Name (Changed)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	No. of years	Teacher type
Saugat	Male	32	Dalit	1	Rahat Darbandi (Relief quota) teachers
Milan	Male	27	Madhesi Chettri	1	Permanent teacher
Jyoti	Male	40	*Pahadi (hill) Bahun*	5	Permanent teacher
Richa	Female	33	Dalit	15	Local teacher
Sahara	Female	35	*Pahadi (hill) Bahun*	14	Temporary
Rupashri	Female	38	*Pahadi (hill) Bahun*	10	Rahat Darbandi (Relief quota) teachers
Rabi[9]	Male	55	*Pahadi (hill) Bahun*	10	Local teacher

I was asked again, as in the previous schools, fill and to engage students in any way I deemed appropriate. I used these sessions to collaborate with learners and generate data. Given the school's small enrolment, I was able to interact with nearly all learners during the fieldwork period.

Across the three schools, the teachers and students I interacted with formed a comparable set of participants, enabling meaningful horizontal comparison across distinct but nested school contexts (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

Ethical considerations

Ethics is a subject that needs great reflection. In this section, I will build on my philosophical positionings as detailed earlier. Ethics are what researchers ought and ought not to do while conducting research (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012, p. 2). There are two aspects of ethical considerations, procedural ethics and ethics in practice, that need to be considered carefully (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2017). Procedural ethics are the basic processes and principles that are to be followed by any study (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Ethics in practice is more of a philosophical reflection on the impact and process of research and on how it is conducted (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013).

- **Procedural ethics**

Before starting my fieldwork, I obtained ethical approval from the University of Glasgow's College of Social Sciences. Following this, I was required to obtain permission from the local authorities in Nepal. I was informed that, due to the

[9] Rabi agreed to participate in the study only through classroom observations.

restructuring of the state, permission from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) was no longer required.

I therefore applied for and received approval from the three local authorities based on the university's letter and the documents I had provided. These approvals were issued as letters permitting access to the schools (see *Appendix 10*). All three local authorities advised me to avoid focusing solely on the negatives and to highlight some of the things that are working. While these steps were essential, they addressed only formal procedural ethics. I also ensured that the participants' privacy was protected through pseudonyms and making sure they were made aware of how they were free to stop participating in the research or ask me to remove aspects they did not want me to include. My fieldwork was guided by these principles. In practice, the realities of fieldwork required moving beyond compliance to situated, relational ethics in practice that respected participants' values and cultural norms.

- **Recruitment of teachers**

As planned, I held three information sessions in the principal's office across the three schools with primary/basic-level teachers. In these information sessions, I introduced myself, presented the Plain Language Statement (PLS) (see *Appendix 6*), and discussed in detail my research, what I intended to do, their role, and how data would be generated. I also explained to them that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. I also emphasised how their identities, experiences, opinions and the data generated through the study would remain anonymous and confidential. The teachers also asked questions about the nature of my research and how the data would be processed. In all three schools, all primary-level teachers (except one) consented to participate in the study. However, consent was not a straightforward process in practice, as described below.

- **Recruitment of children**

I sought permission from principals and teachers to hold information sessions with children across the participating basic schools. I was formally introduced in all three schools during the morning assembly. The information sessions were held class by class with the principal's permission, and in the presence of a teacher.

The information sessions were conversational and interactive, during which I explained and walked them through the PLS (see *Appendix 7*), discussed what the research was, and outlined what I was here to do and what they were to do. The children asked clarifying questions throughout the sessions. I emphasised that their participation was voluntary and that everything they would say would remain anonymous. However, I explained that in situations where they might be at risk of harm, I would speak to the teacher or principal or they could speak to an adult directly.

Obtaining consent during fieldwork

It is important to note that ethical clearance was only the beginning of the journey the study had to undertake (Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013). Ethics was not as straightforward as expected: it did not align neatly with the ethical protocols outlined in the ethics application, but was intertwined with cultural contexts and how participants perceived research (Naveed et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013). Therefore, it became necessary to move beyond formal protocols to relational strategies that were contextual and respected the participants' realities (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2017). Ethics in practice took shape through a myriad relational interactions and negotiations that are not fully envisioned by formal Western universities' ethics protocols (Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013).

In practice, these ethical commitments shaped how data were generated and treated. Although formal interviews often unfolded as informal conversations, this did not mean that everything teachers shared was automatically treated as data. In line with relational and situated ethics, I continually negotiated the boundaries of what could be included in the study (Hammersley and Traianou, 2016). Teachers frequently indicated which parts of a conversation they did not want recorded or used, and I honoured these requests. This ongoing process of consent ensured that participants retained control over what entered the dataset. Rather than treating all speech as 'data', I used only the aspects that directly addressed the research questions. Where possible, I shared interview transcripts with teachers. Thus, even though the interview format shifted, the ethical principles of autonomy, voluntariness, and confidentiality remained central throughout the research process.

Consent as a relational and situated process

In research, consent is important, but participants' informed consent is even more crucial (Ravitch and Carl, 2019; Roth and Unger, 2018). The focus was on ensuring that participants knew what they were getting involved in and how this might affect them (Ravitch and Carl, 2019). Crucially, the information needed to remain accessible. Therefore, it was not necessary to compose consent forms in formal, contractual ways; they could be warm and personal, even when covering mandatory information (Ravitch and Carl, 2019, p. 212). Importantly, trust was not treated as inherently ethical or benign; relational closeness also required critical scrutiny, as it could obscure power asymmetries or participants' ability to refuse.

I went into the field with my consent forms, my Plain Language Statements (PLS) (see Appendix *8* and *9*), and all the necessary documents mandated by the University of Glasgow. However, when I used the PLS to explain and talk about the research, teachers became very defensive. I was told later that the documents made it sound formal and important, something they felt they could not take part in because they "were not good enough". Similar concerns also emerged during interviews and participant observations. This response revealed how written consent functioned not as a form of protection but as a symbol of hierarchy and perceived inadequacy.

I therefore adopted a verbal strategy explaining that as a PhD student at the University of Glasgow I am expected to follow specific procedures set out by associations such as BERA. This includes ensuring autonomy and anonymity. When I spoke about written consent, teachers would remark, "Do you not trust us?" While written consent is often treated as a universal ethical safeguard, its meaning is culturally situated. In contexts where oral communication carries equal legitimacy, written consent can be experienced as distancing rather than protective, reinforcing perceptions of mistrust (Hammersley and Traianou, 2016; Kara, 2018).

Although written consent symbolises an agreement between participants and researchers, it does not guarantee trust (Kara, 2018). As the research progressed, dynamics shifted, so the relationship of mutual trust needed continuous attention (Kara, 2018). A signature alone could not ensure participation in every stage of data generation. Instead, rapport and trust were

essential for enabling participants to retain autonomy over how they wished to engage (Hammersley and Traianou, 2016). Additionally, dominant Western notions of consent emphasise information, comprehension, and voluntarism, principles that may not align neatly with many cultural contexts (Shamim and Qureshi, 2013).

Verbal or written consent was obtained prior to participants' involvement in data generation processes. In practice, I constantly sought verbal consent throughout the fieldwork. Participants were informed repeatedly about the study and their right to decide to participate or not. At the end, the participants themselves would ask me about the forms I had mentioned earlier and sign them, often without reading them in detail. These signatures did not replace consent but followed sustained engagement. Formal documentation remained part of the ethical record while consent itself was treated as ongoing and relational.

These experiences echo wider calls to move beyond procedural ethics, particularly when conducting research across cultures and contexts (Kara, 2018; Naveed et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant and Wolf, 2016). Rather than abandoning ethical rigour, this approach demands greater reflexivity. It recognises that ethical practices emerge through situated relational judgment, not just compliance (Israel, 2018).

Navigating children's consent

When it came to obtaining consent from children, teachers and principals frequently questioned why children's consent was necessary. This implied that seeking permission from children was unnecessary and "too Western". While my time with the children was not viewed with any suspicion, it was often seen as a "favour" and "learning opportunity" for them; however, ethical guidance shaped my approach. In line with the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2024, Point 23), children who are capable of forming their own views must receive clear, age-appropriate information and be given a genuine opportunity to decide whether to participate, with the right to withdraw at any time. These principles also stress that consent should be an ongoing relational process rather than a single event.

In line with these principles, I insisted that parents be sent a letter informing them of my presence and my research. The principals felt this was unnecessary, but agreed to send the letters. I also realised that the process of formally sending letters to inform parents was unusual in these local contexts. As a result, levels of parental formal consent also varied by school. In Shree Maya and Shree Siddhartha, I met a handful of parents who were aware of my presence and understood what I was doing. In Shree Saraswati, a close-knit rural community, all parents were aware of my presence and research activities through daily interactions and community conversations.

The children themselves received clear verbal explanations of the research and were repeatedly reminded that participation was voluntary. I also presented them with the consent form (see *Appendix 9*). They often gave me verbal consent while some signed the forms. They often laughed and commented that no one had ever asked for their permission before. However, they exercised this agency in practice. Some chose to complete homework rather than participate in activities, and these decisions were respected. Others indicated that they wished to participate only in certain activities or discussions, or chose not to participate at all.

This informal but comprehensive awareness complemented the more formal steps I took to inform principals, teachers, and children, aligning with BERA's guidance that consent procedures can be culturally adapted, provided they remain grounded in voluntary, informed participation.

Navigating the field: everyday ethics with teachers and students

The following vignette illustrates how trust, comfort, and openness were negotiated differently with teachers and children, shaped by cultural expectations, my own positionality, and the field's evolving nature.

Navigating trust with the teachers

> *At the start of my fieldwork, invisible walls were already in place because I was representing a UK university and working on a PhD. This set me apart in the eyes of many teachers due to cultural expectations that women my age are typically focused on raising families. This difference influenced how I was perceived.*

> *The research was described as "intimidating", especially with all the participant information sheets and consent forms. I was told that "the teachers felt they were going to be under surveillance with my presence in the school". Not knowing how to deal with these invisible walls, I admitted that we have the flexibility to approach data generation however we see fit. I also mentioned that the teachers were free not to participate in the research. After this, we ended the conversation.*
>
> *The next morning, I bought a kilo of oranges and peanuts because it was mid-winter. As a Nepali, in winter, it is very common for families, friends, and colleagues to sit together and eat oranges and peanuts in the sun. I took them to school, hoping to share them with the teachers. That day, the teachers who were free sat with me and we ate the oranges and peanuts in the sun.*
>
> *Over the following two weeks, we spent time together in the sun, eating oranges and peanuts. We took turns bringing them without any formal arrangement. Our time in the sun was sometimes filled with conversation, and at other times we sat in silence; it was not uncomfortable. This helped build trust; although nothing tangible resulted, sharing meals together helped both the teachers and me become less conscious of how the other might perceive us.*
>
> *Vignette based on Field Notes in Shree Maya, December 2023*

Navigating trust with the children

A similar, but distinct, process unfolded when working with the children across the three schools. They were warm and welcoming from the beginning (Buscatto, 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). They were eager to try new activities and insisted that I "teach" them something new. They enthusiastically participated in the activities and expressed their interests. Many loved dancing and singing. I also taught occasional lessons in Maths, English, and Nepali when substituting for lessons.

The more time we spent together, the closer we became. Yet trust still developed slowly. At first, children were hesitant to share critical thoughts about school or personal struggles (de la Bellacasa, 2012). They interacted

easily, but guardedly. Over time, as they started to trust me more, through shared activities, conversations, and play, they began to open up about classroom experiences and difficulties at home (Hohti, 2016; Simmons and Watson, 2015). Some even invited me to their homes. These invitations reflected a level of personal trust that emerged gradually, through everyday interactions rather than formal research processes (Robinson-Pant, 2005; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013).

The trust I built with teachers and students also carried unspoken expectations that I accurately represented their experiences, and, as much as possible, in a positive light. But certain practices and beliefs were evident, which, in the name of culture, were used to justify specific actions. Navigating these moments required an ongoing ethical judgement, particularly in relation to situational and relational ethics (Tracy, 2010). I had to consciously remind myself that my job as a researcher is not just to introspect but to represent what it is, the way it is, even when it was uncomfortable or controversial. All this informed the decisions I made in how I analysed the data and presented them in the thesis (Tracy, 2010).

This makes it clear that the ethics in practice in the study went beyond the specified criteria of anonymity, consent, or avoiding harm. It was situated, relational and emergent *(Robinson-Pant, 2005; Robinson-Pant and Wolf, 2016)*. Such relational ethics are not fully accounted for in procedural ethics, especially in contexts shaped by cultural norms, power, and everyday practices *(Naveed et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013)*.

Data generation methods

The CCS approach enables the use of multiple and complementary ethnographically informed methods to generate nuanced and situated data across sites and scales (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2023b). While embedded in the schools, I used fieldnotes to document my observations, thoughts, and interactions both inside and outside classrooms. This included relevant conversations with students and teachers. Classroom observations were a core part of this process. At times, I observed lessons as a non-participant. At other times, I became involved in the lessons depending on the lesson's needs, on teachers' invitations, or when required.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers to explore in depth their practices, experiences, and interpretations. With students, data were collected through classroom conversations, either when I replaced teachers or during sessions where I worked directly with them. Creative activities supported these interactions by providing a shared focus for reflection on various aspects of learning experiences. The drawings and activities served as prompts for conversations rather than data in themselves. The actual data comprised the conversations during these activities. I refer to this as Activity With Students (AWS).

All data were generated in Nepali; however, the notes I took were in English and Romanised Nepali. Overall, the data-generation process was flexible and context-responsive. These interactions enabled teachers and learners to reflect collaboratively on their teaching–learning experience (Cohen et al., 2018; Hammersley, 2018a). The elements operationalised in the theoretical framework served as guiding concepts during the data generation process. These concepts shaped my focus during interviews, observations, and activities with the children. They directed attention to how practices were experienced and shaped by relationships, structures, and shared cultural beliefs. See *Table 20* for an overview of data generation methods used.

Table 20: Overview of data generation methods used with participants

Method	**Participants**
Semi-structured interviews (‘informal conversations’)	Teachers
Also, informal/casual conversations (guided by the interview guide)	
Activities With Students (AWS)	Students
Arts-based methods: drawings, paintings and colouring	
Poetry	
Conversations with students (CWS)	
Semi-structured conversations	
Classroom observations	Teachers and students

Method	**Participants**
Fieldnotes	Embedded experiences of Pritha, observation notes, and reflective notes along with conversations. Pritha/students/teachers

The following section describes how the methods were applied to generate data and how the data were used.

Semi-structured interviews

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017b) state that "semi-structured and unstructured interviews are more consistent with the CCS approach because they address the processual nature of conversation and the social dimension of knowledge production" (p. 53). When designing the study, I chose the conversational, open-ended style of semi-structured interviews (Roulston and Choi, 2018). This approach created space where teachers could share their perceptions, evaluations, opinions, and classroom experiences (Brinkmann, 2018). I used an interview guide (see *Appendix 1*) to orient the discussion while enabling the flexibility for a more open-ended conversational approach (Roulston and Choi, 2018).

Additionally, the less hierarchical character of these interviews helped minimise the objectification of the participants (Oakley, 1998). This created space for the teachers and I to engage in interactive and reflexive processes (Carpenter, 2018). This facilitated collaboration and dialogue between us (Oakley, 1998). It enabled us to jointly develop an understanding of how practitioners view, interpret, and implement LCE reform agendas. This contributed to the generation of the 'thick description' required for the horizontal axis of comparison (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

Moreover, the interviews aimed to provide opportunities for the teachers to 'talk back', thereby humanising both the participants and the researcher (Pink, 2015). The interviews helped explore the cultural underpinnings of teachers' pedagogical practices (Alexander, 2000). Interview data also contributed to the vertical axis of comparison when reflecting on policies and the transversal axis when reflecting on their experiences and beliefs over time (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

I went into the field assuming that my readings on semi-structured interviews had prepared me to adapt to the contexts. I believed that once I built a relationship with the teachers, interviews wouldn't be difficult (Brinkmann, 2018). I soon realised that relationships with teachers did not guarantee their willingness to participate in interviews (Oakley, 2016). I needed to contextualise what I had read in relation to Pink's (2015) concept of participants talking back and Oakley's ideas (1998, 2016) of minimising hierarchy and objectification. The realities of the field demanded that I use cultural and relational elements to establish trust and apply these ideas in practice.

I realised that teachers were open to informal conversations with me. They would discuss their personal lives, share their opinions and experiences about teaching, their disillusionment with their profession and their students, the challenges they faced, and their self-doubt (Oakley, 1998). Everything I had hoped to discuss in the interviews. However, as soon as I mentioned interviews or arranging a time, all teachers except one male teacher became hesitant. They told me they had "nothing important to say in interviews".

According to many of the participants, the 'interviewing' process formalised our relationship (Oakley, 2016), meaning they could not "just say what was on their mind". They felt they had to be "intelligent and cautious" because they were "representing their institutions", which "needed to be represented positively because the outsiders need not know the everyday tensions and challenges."

To address these concerns, I began using our informal conversations as the basis for interviews and stopped naming these sessions as 'interviews' (Hammer and Wildavsky, 2018). The conversations were guided by the interview guide (*Appendix 1*), and I still informed teachers and sought consent. Teachers said that not calling these interactions interviews reduced the pressure to "present their views properly". This adaptation was shaped by my 'liquid inbetweener' (Barnes, 2023) status as a researcher navigating insider–outsider dynamics, in which trust and rapport influenced the formality of the interviews (Milligan, 2016).

Interview process

A total of 21 teachers participated in semi-structured interviews across the three schools. Interviews are reported by participant rather than by the number of

sessions; where required, interviews were conducted across multiple shorter sittings to accommodate teachers' availability.

Shree Maya

I interviewed eight primary teachers based on their availability. As I did not have permission to record the interviews, I took extensive notes with their permission. They sometimes asked to see what I had written, and I showed them my notes. I was sometimes asked to exclude certain aspects, and I did so. The interviews lasted between one and two hours in total, but were completed over several shorter sessions (20–30 minutes) because teachers found it difficult to dedicate longer periods. These short, repeated sessions allowed me to reflect between conversations and return with follow-up questions. Most conversations took place in open courtyard spaces or available rooms. These conversations centred on teachers' practices, their experiences of learning and teaching, and their perceptions of students, schools, and reforms in line with the interview guide.

Shree Siddhartha

I interviewed seven primary teachers, but we did not refer to these as formal interviews because they found it "intimidating", so we called them "conversations" guided by my interview guide. All teachers gave verbal consent for me to record the interviews, so I took notes only when necessary. After each interview, I wrote brief reflections and expanded them in the evening. Teachers preferred to be interviewed during terminal exams, as they were more available then, and most conversations were completed in a single one- to two-hour session, with only two taking place across multiple shorter sessions. All interviews took place in empty classrooms or an unoccupied staffroom. As with Shree Maya, these conversations centred on teachers' practices, their perceptions and beliefs about education and students, their life experiences, and their opinions on reforms. These interactions complemented classroom observations, allowing for deeper exploration of their practices.

Shree Saraswati

I interviewed six primary teachers (Rabi declined to participate in interviews). The interviews were scheduled according to the teachers' convenience, and all seven teachers consented to being recorded. The interviews were usually

divided into two or three shorter sessions (20–30 minutes) to suit teachers' schedules. Teachers living nearby met me in the library, while those living further away were interviewed in their homes, typically on Saturdays. The conversations were shaped by the interview guide and were a mixture of their teaching experiences, practices, perceptions of educational reforms, and views on being both teachers and students. We also discussed specific practices using my classroom observation notes.

Together, the data generated through these interviews informed all three CCS axes by revealing teachers' practices (horizontal), their interpretations of policy (vertical), and their experiences over time (transversal) (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

Participant observation

Participant observation was chosen because it aligns with ethnographic approaches and enables immersive engagement within the research context (Hammersley, 2018b). Through prolonged embedding across the three schools, I generated detailed and situated contextual descriptions (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). This was made possible by spending extended periods in each school, which allowed sustained engagement with everyday practices and interactions (see *Table 21* for an overview of time spent in the schools). Such immersion enabled me to access both tacit and actual experiences, supporting a deeper situated understanding of each school's contextual realities (Pink, 2015).

Table 21: Overview of time spent in each school

School	Time spent
Shree Maya	8 weeks
Shree Siddhartha	9.5 weeks
Shree Saraswati	9.5 weeks

To understand how teaching and learning manifested in practice, classroom observation formed a core part of participant observation. This approach provides detailed insights into classroom proceedings, including interactions with students, lesson conduct, body language, teachers' behavioural nuances, and students' responses to the teaching-learning processes (Bratich, 2018; Musante, 2015).

This method was central to addressing the research question on understanding the experiences of teachers and learners while engaging in the learning process guided by reforms to implement LCE classrooms. The observation data added to the 'thick' description but also became points of comparison to explore experiences in light of reforms and retrospective reflections. Although the number of observed lessons is reported for transparency, the purpose of these observations was immersion rather than quantification, consistent with ethnographically informed CCS (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). These elements contributed to a richer and more nuanced analysis across all three axes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

- **Classroom observations**

Overview of classroom observations

A total of 308 lessons were observed across the three schools. *Table 22* summarises the distribution of observations across schools, subjects, and grades. Beyond these numbers, the focus remained on immersion and understanding teaching and learning as situated practice rather than on quantifying the lessons observed.

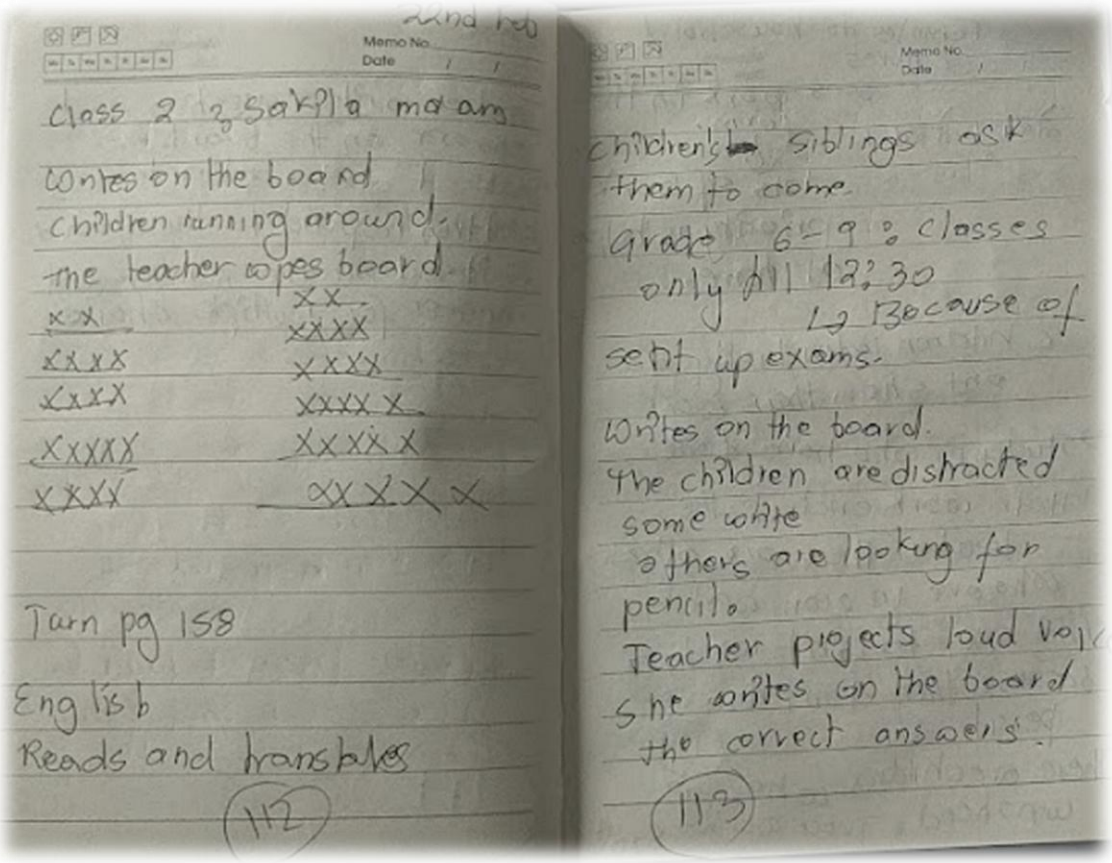
Table 22: Overview of classroom observations across the three schools

Schools	Number of observations	Grades observed	Subjects
Shree Maya	58	1-4	English, Maths, Nepali, *Newar*i, Science, Social Studies, *Serophero*
Shree Siddhartha	133	1-8	English, Maths, Nepali, Optional English, Science, Social Studies, *Serophero*
Shree Saraswati	117	1-8	Computing, English, Health, *Kathekhola,* Maths, Nepali, *Serophero,* Science, Social Studies,

I used an observation guide (see *Appendix 2*) to support consistency across sites, but its purpose was to orient my attention rather than prescribe what to look for, reflecting the flexible ethnographic nature of work. I observed and then wrote my notes for about two minutes. I recorded critical incidents and descriptive observations, as shown in *Figure 11* (see *Appendix 3* for observation notes). In the evenings, I revisited the class-observation notes and added reflective comments where necessary. Although these numbers and procedures

are included for transparency, the focus remained on immersion and understanding teaching and learning as situated practice rather than on quantifying the lessons observed.

Figure 11: Example of class observation notes from Shree Siddhartha



Shree Maya

I observed 58 lessons across grades one to four. I usually sat at the back, though students sometimes asked me to sit beside them. Of these lessons, 35 lasted the full 45 minutes, 10 lasted 20–30 minutes when teachers arrived late, and 13 lasted less than 15 minutes. Whether I was part of the lesson depended on the teacher's preference. Often, teachers involved me in the lesson, by asking me to correct classwork, help students with their tasks, or offer my advice.

Shree Siddhartha

I observed 133 lessons across grades one to eight. As in Shree Maya, I sat at the back for visibility. Of these lessons, 20 lasted the full 40 minutes, 41 lasted 25–30 minutes, 39 lasted 15–20 minutes, and 33 lasted less than 15 minutes. Here too, whether I was part of the lesson depended on the teacher's preference.

Teachers frequently involved me, asking me to help engage learners or pose questions related to the lesson.

Shree Saraswati

I observed 117 lessons across grades one to eight. Given the small number of students, I sat next to them during lessons. Of these lessons, 50 lasted the full 40 minutes, 35 lasted 20–30 minutes, and 32 lasted less than 15 minutes. As in the other schools, whether I was part of the lesson depended on the teacher's preference. I participated actively, often correcting work or explaining content with the teacher.

- **Observation process and implementation**

I had planned to take extensive notes of what was going on as well as of my own behaviour and thoughts, during the observations (Merriam, 1988). Participant observation was particularly well suited to the CCS design, as it enabled relational, processual and contextually embedded knowledge generation (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). However, in the field, I found that taking notes made teachers feel insecure and judged. They would often ask me what I was writing down, or whether they had done something wrong, or if I was unhappy with their performance. This visible note-taking formalised my presence and heightened the sense of scrutiny. By mutual agreement, I began taking shorthand notes, which I elaborated at the end of the day, allowing for continuous reflexive engagement (Emerson et al., 2011).

Even though I took my observation form with me, to remind myself to note critical incidents, I was never just a 'fly on the wall' during class observations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Wästerfors, 2018). Rather, I was an active participant in the lesson. The teachers would often ask me questions or include me in the lessons by having me share my opinion, checking students' work, and suggesting possible techniques. When learners misbehaved in class, I was often asked to think of appropriate consequences for the children. Teachers frequently asked for my thoughts on the lesson. Many of the teachers (mostly female teachers) would often confide in me, saying they were doing the best they could, knowing that their practice did not align with how it was "supposed" to be. Upon much reflection, I believe that my participation in the lessons and school was also culturally grounded (Buscatto, 2018).

I was also aware that my presence in the classroom changed the dynamics of pedagogical practices and classroom interaction (Alexander, 2000; Fetterman, 2020a). Students in all three schools told me that my presence reduced the intensity and frequency of corporal punishment. At the same time, other teachers noted that school leaders were on their best behaviour when I was around (Buscatto, 2018). I reflected on these observations almost every evening (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). These tensions shaped how shared space was negotiated. It reinforced that the purpose of the study was not to 'discover' new practices but to understand how teachers and learners engaged with teaching and learning in a post-reform context.

Within a week in all three schools, I was regarded as one of the staff members. This included being asked to fill in lessons when teachers were absent or had other duties. I was permitted to use this time to generate data with children. Often, I was asked to go to multiple classes in a day, further embedding me in everyday school life. I was asked to help them at the school in various capacities. Additionally, during staff meetings, I was tasked with taking notes and writing applications for the local authorities. I was therefore fully involved in the school rather than positioned as an external observer. As a result, I switched from my initial plan of being an observer to that of a participant observer (Buscatto, 2018; Musante, 2015).

This is because in Nepali culture, when you have guests, you ensure they are not just sitting idly. Non-participation can be interpreted as disrespectful (and my prior teaching experience was also considered as being useful). The teachers would reiterate that they could not help but talk to me when I was in their lessons, saying, "You are our friend now, and we are in this together." This cultural expectation shaped my positionality and made participation a natural part of the research process. It enabled the generation of data *with* participants rather than *on* them. My insider status was helpful because I was able to pick up cultural nuances that might be invisible to an outsider (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007).

Participant observation helped generate rich and situated insights into the teaching-learning process shaped by the fluid and co-constructed relational nature of the fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Musante, 2015; Pink, 2015). The data generated helped inform the horizontal axis, where the focus

was on understanding how practices were shaped and negotiated through relational and contextual realities (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

Generating data with children

To understand how learners experienced and made sense of everyday learning experiences, I worked directly with children through flexible, participatory approaches (Simmons and Watson, 2015). Their insights were generated through conversations, shared activities, and classroom interactions during fieldwork (Alderson, 2012). These approaches helped ensure that students could express their perspectives in ways that felt comfortable and meaningful to them, rather than through formal or adult-centred research tools (Sudarsan et al., 2022). These methods also helped minimise the power dynamics between the students and me as a researcher (Barton, 2015; Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008).

I went into the schools with the intention of generating data with students through observations, interviews, and focus group discussions supported by arts-based methods. The teachers across the three schools were very open to me interacting with and spending time with the students and often asked me to substitute lessons. This provided extended periods with students during class hours and allowed Activities With Students (AWS) to develop naturally within daily routines. As a result, I often had the full forty- or forty-five-minute lesson with students across different grades (depending on permissions), while classroom doors remained open and teachers dropped in and out. These sessions are documented in Tables 24-26 to illustrate the scale and density of ethnographic engagement, rather than to serve as a measure of participation or comparison.

Considering this situation, conducting focus groups or interviews did not seem feasible. Instead, I began designing activities that could engage students while also generating data. This adaptation illustrates how the 'liquid inbetweener' positionality (Barnes, 2023) enabled me to adjust and accommodate to meet the children's contextual needs and interests.

This involved engaging in activities and conversations around a wide range of topics (see *Table 23 and Appendix 4*). While these topics were broadly similar across schools, they were adjusted by age group and grade. Younger students responded more to concrete and familiar themes, whereas older students

engaged more readily with abstract or reflective topics. Across activities, students were encouraged to reflect on their experiences. Although the activities were designed to inform the research questions, the process remained fluid, and conversations often moved beyond the planned prompts.

It is important to reiterate that I received permission from teachers to work with the children. Furthermore, all activities and conversations that took place during lessons with children were conducted with ongoing consent, with children free to participate or choose not to do so, and the classroom doors remained open. For conversations outside planned activities (e.g. during lunch or one-to-one interactions), I sought explicit permission before including any material as data (Fetterman, 2020a).

Table 23: Overview of topics discussed across schools with students to generate data

General topic
• School and the thoughts you get • Favourite teacher, subject, activity • Things you do not like in school • Learning new things • Why do you learn what you do • As a principal, the things I will do • A good student is… • A good teacher is…
• Family and friends • Parents' expectations • Best friends • What will I become when I become big
• Favourite food, favourite show, favourite place to visit, animals
• If I could be anyone or anything, what would I be • If I could change the world…

I put on my teacher and researcher hats together as it was my priority to ensure they felt comfortable with me and not pressured to participate in the study (MacDougall and Darbyshire, 2018). As a group, we decided on the activities we would do. I would give them options, and through conversations we would decide what to discuss and which activities to do (Hohti, 2016; Luthuli et al., 2020). As the children became comfortable with me, when the teachers were absent, they started inviting me to attend class.

The time I spent with the students across the three schools was a mixture of activities and conversations. I would take notes when they were working on their 'tasks' or during conversations with their peers or with me, asking each time for permission. Unlike the adult participants, this did not seem to bother them. In fact, they would sometimes tell me after they picked up my pattern that it was "probably time to write down notes" about the conversations. I would expand on my notes in the evening as I did with classroom observations. This gave me space to reflect again. These conversations provided situated insights that primarily informed the horizontal axis, offering comparative accounts of children's everyday learning experiences across the three schools (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

- **Conversations as part of Activities With Students (AWS)**

The conversations I had with the children built trust and created space for me to dig deeper into their experiences. They often shared more readily about their personal lives than about critical opinions of teachers or the school. The critical opinions were shared only after a certain level of trust had been established (Hammersley, 2018b). This did not happen linearly or within a specified window. Instead, it happened as we shared experiences and time together (Pink, 2015). The students were also aware that I was doing research and would often tell me, "Not liking a teacher is one thing, but making them look bad is another. After all, we don't want our teachers to be negatively viewed in your university." Students would sometimes come in groups to talk to me during lunchtime; other times, they would come individually.

The conversations also involved them asking me about my PhD life and my life in general. These exchanges helped break down perceived hierarchies between us (Oakley, 1998, 2016). My handwriting seemed to be an icebreaker, where one student commented, "The way you write says a lot about you, it makes you less intimidating." (Note: I have large handwriting and have been criticised all my life for it being too childish!)

When sensitive issues came up, they made me "promise" not to tell anyone, especially their teachers. However, I made all students aware that if they were in immediate danger or at risk of harm, I would have to break confidentiality and share it with the teachers, principal, and, if required, parents (Pereira et al., 2017). Children across age groups, including those as young as six, exercised

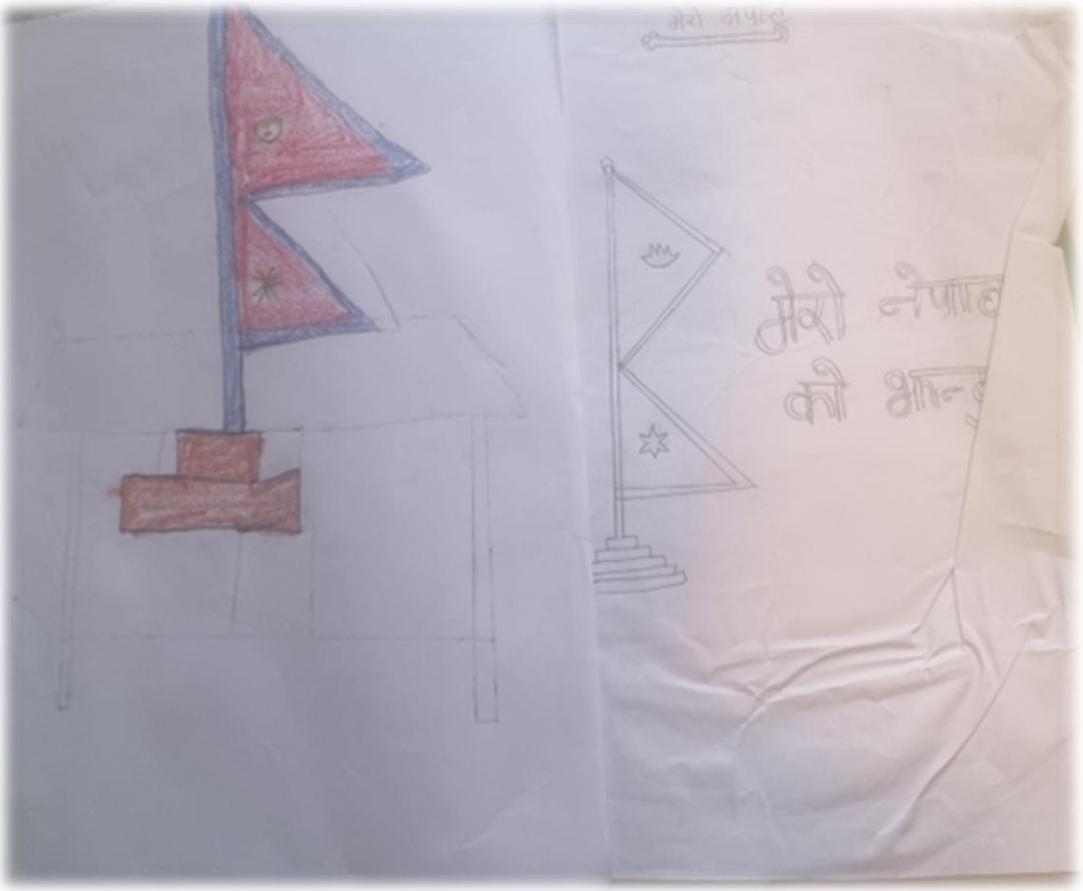
agency by flagging information as confidential or indicating what should not be used in the research (Bonati and Andriana, 2021; MacDougall and Darbyshire, 2018; Pereira et al., 2017). Sometimes, the children would just come and sit next to me and say, "I don't want to say anything", and we would just sit next to each other.

- **The use of arts-based methods**

Students across the three schools were enthusiastic to engage with the various creative activities. Drawings, paintings, and colouring were the most popular activities (Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008), particularly amongst the children in grades one to four across the three schools. In all three schools, I carried lots of A4 paper, coloured paper, coloured pencils, and crayons. These materials helped break the ice and created space for conversations as students coloured and worked.

The drawing process occurred in stages, and at the beginning, the students would ask me what they should draw. They asked for instructions and often asked if they could draw the national flag. This reflected their initial hesitancy and preference for familiar symbols (see *Figure 12*).

Figure 12: Two separate drawings of the Nepali flag from children in different schools



As students became more comfortable with me, they exercised greater agency, choosing what to draw and how to represent their ideas. Their growing comfort deepened our conversations, and they shared richer details about their experiences (Alderson, 2012; Luthuli et al., 2020) (see *Figure 13*).

Figure 13: Drawings from four different students across three schools of what they thought about their schools



Over time, we began co-constructing prompts together, such as what an ideal school looks like (Blaisdell et al., 2019). I used students' drawings as catalysts for discussing their learning experiences (Blaisdell et al., 2019). This would often lead to group dialogue in which students shared and reflected on their experiences, what they liked or did not like. However, it is important to note that the drawings themselves, or the creative arts artefacts, were not considered part of the data set. The data were generated through the conversations that emerged around these creative activities.

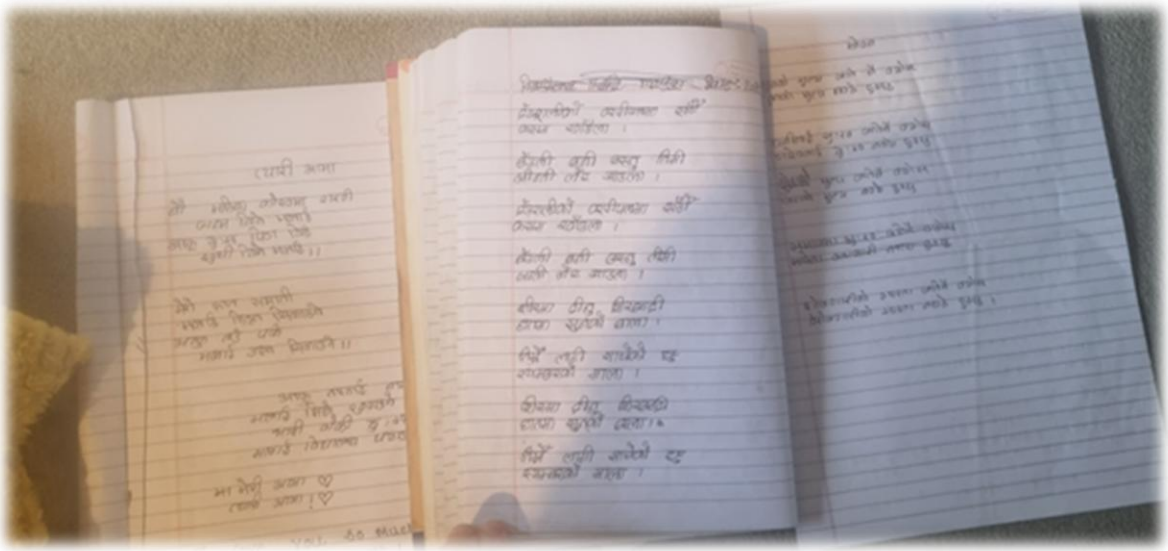
- **Poetry**

As with the other creative methods, poetry became another medium through which learners engaged in the data-generation process. Poetry was effective because it gave participants a voice without being too confronting (Eshun and Madge, 2012). It also allowed multiple voices and supported the co-construction of experiences (Eshun and Madge, 2012).

This method was particularly popular among children in grades five to eight across the three schools. They would write and recite the poems based on topics we decided together. They wrote about things that they thought mattered to them. These included themes of appreciating parents and the struggles of life.

The children preferred to write in Nepali, and those in Shree Siddhartha switched between their mother tongue, *Awadhi*, and Nepali, but produced their work in Nepali, see *Figure 14*.

Figure 14: Poetry written by students in grade eight (Shree Saraswati), and grades seven and eight (Shree Siddhartha)



Poetry was used to engage students in conversations about their experiences and perceptions of learning and school. The poetry itself was not analysed as data; rather, the data were generated through the conversations it prompted. I found that many of the children used metaphors to describe situations (Hickey-Moody et al., 2021; Hohti, 2016). When experiences were being shared, they would flag certain experiences as confidential and tell me not to include them in my data. At other times, they would tell me to use the information but change the names. Poetry enabled us to explore their perceptions, experiences, and beliefs in greater depth, without the process feeling intrusive or formal.

- **AWS with students in Shree Maya**

Although I was asked to cover lessons when teachers were absent, this participation formed part of my role as a participant observer rather than as a classroom teacher. During these periods, AWS emerged naturally through informal conversations and shared tasks, and data were generated with students' ongoing permission and consent, as discussed earlier. *Table 24* summarises the formal sessions conducted with students; informal interactions are not included here.

Table 24: Overview of sessions with the students in Shree Maya

Interaction form	**Grades**	**No. of sessions (40 minutes)**
Activity with students	One	20
	Two	19
	Three	23
	Four	20
Total		**82**
Winter break sessions for two weeks	One, two, three, four	5 days a week

I worked with students across grades one to four. On regular school days, I worked with learners in their respective classes during free periods when I was specifically asked to go, which created extended opportunities for AWS activities. During the winter break, I worked across grade levels.

I received permission from the teachers to collaborate with students at Shree Maya for sustained periods. This sustained presence helped me build relationships with students over time. Students across grades often asked me questions about myself at the beginning of lessons. Learners in grades one and two told me they were interested in arts-based activities, such as drawing and colouring, so I tailored activities to this (MacDougall and Darbyshire, 2018). Students in grades three and four often asked me specifically to help them with some of the lessons and subjects they were struggling with. They were also interested in drawing, colouring, role play, and quiz competitions.

During the two-week winter holidays, students attending the four-hour sessions became more comfortable with me through extended time together. They engaged in loosely structured group work, as I did not enforce a strict structure. Although this was initially unfamiliar, students later commented that they appreciated it as different from a “usual classroom”. They often worked in groups in the sun while discussing topics, and with permission, I took notes of some group conversations.

An issue that repeatedly came up as the students started to trust me was the challenging circumstances they navigated at home, which was also a reason they

chose to come to school during the holidays. Their experiences shaped their outlooks towards teaching and learning. These extended interactions helped build mutual trust, moving beyond the "formal research relations" (Wästerfors, 2018).

- **AWS with children in Shree Siddhartha**

At Shree Siddhartha, data generation primarily occurred during lessons when I was asked to cover classes, which provided extended time for AWS to take place. The large student numbers shaped the dynamics of AWS, requiring group-based activities and multiple simultaneous tasks to engage learners. This also shaped the relationships I formed with students. Unlike in Shree Maya and Shree Saraswati, I did not develop individual relationships. Instead, relationships were formed with friendship groups who interacted with me.

Given the large class sizes, sharing reflections required multiple methods (Simmons and Watson, 2015). Linguistic diversity, particularly the use of both *Awadhi* and Nepali shaped classroom communication and the ways students expressed themselves (Resch and Enzenhofer, 2018). Students actively asked for feedback during these interactions. *Table 25* summarises the sessions held working with children.

Table 25: Overview of sessions with the students in Shree Siddhartha

Interaction form	**Grades**		**No. of sessions (40 minutes)**	
Activity with students	1		19	
	2		18	
	3		18	
	4		16	
	5		17	
	6A	6B	15	13
	7A	7B	12	16
	8A	8B	11	10
Total			**165**	

- **AWS with children in Shree Saraswati**

Since the school was very small and closely connected with the community, data generation occurred not only during lessons but also beyond the classroom, such as when walking together to and from school (Kusenbach, 2018). I collaborated

across grades and, given the small number of students, the conversations and activities were more focused, and we could discuss each individual's experiences and opinions (Wästerfors, 2018).

Personal bonds formed naturally, and I was invited to almost everyone's house for multiple meals. I accompanied students when they collected firewood (Buscatto, 2018). They often did this with their friends, so we engaged in conversations while we walked. *Table 26* summarises the formal AWS sessions conducted with students in Shree Saraswati.

Table 26: Overview of sessions with the students in Shree Saraswati

Interaction form	**Grades**	**No. of sessions (40 minutes)**
Activity with students	1	25
	2	23
	3	24
	4	20
	5	22
	6	24
	7	22
	8	18
Total		**178**

Although the specific classroom dynamics varied when discussing different topics, the creative activities provided a consistent methodological thread across the schools (Hickey-Moody et al., 2021; Luthuli et al., 2020). As shown above, the process of generating data with students was highly fluid and shaped by contextual realities, requiring continual adjustment to ensure that learners did not feel pressured to participate. The conversations that emerged around their creative work were essential for generating rich insights into learners' experiences, contributing the missing piece in the 'karmic cycle'.

More broadly, the overall data-generation process across AWS, interviews, and observations was shaped by the rhythms of each school, teachers' availability, and the everyday realities of participating in classroom life. Although the study was not a full ethnography, the data were generated through prolonged Immersion and the application of ethnographic principles which were both essential for producing the 'thick', situated insights required for CCS. These adaptations reflect the iterative, context-sensitive nature of CCS. Together,

these insights primarily informed the horizontal axis. They also offered supporting insights into the vertical and transversal axes. This revealed how policies were enacted and how learners understood their own learning (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2022b), hereafter referred to as reflexive TA. Both the pedagogical nexus and the onto-cultural perspective informed the analysis process from the familiarisation stage onwards, shaping my initial reflective notes. These lenses helped organise the initial codes around relational, structural, and cultural dimensions and guided my interpretive decisions as I moved from codes to identifying broader patterns. The analysis ultimately generated a palette of practices that captured recurrent pedagogical routines across the three schools.

Reflexive TA aligned with the study's interpretivist and constructivist grounding, particularly its emphasis on reflexivity, meaning-making, and analytic flexibility (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2022b). It supported analysis of the relational and contextual features of the collaboratively generated dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2022a, 2022b). The approach also supported movement across cases, levels and temporal patterns, consistent with the study's comparative, multi-scalar design (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

I found that the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022b) were useful but required adjustment for a large and dynamic dataset. The data included detailed fieldnotes, classroom observations, teacher interviews and children's activity-based conversations . This was a non-linear, recursive, and highly reflexive process (Braun and Clarke, 2022b).

The data analysis process

Table 27 provides an overview of Braun and Clarke's (2022b) six phases and how each phase was adjusted in this study. It highlights where adaptations were made in response to the scale and relational complexity of the dataset.

Table 27: Application and adaption of Barun and Clarke's six phases for reflexive TA

Phase	**Braun and Clarke (2022) phases description**	**How this study adapted the phase**
1. Familiarisation	Immersion in the dataset through repeated reading and early noting of ideas.	Numbering and annotating notebooks; organising datasets; transcribing Nepali to English interviews; early mapping of connections and possible patterns.
2. Coding	Systematic coding across the dataset; generating meaningful labels.	Manual coding across datasets, using reflexive memos to track analytic decisions. Codes were iteratively refined, merged, and re-worked across classroom observations, interviews, fieldnotes, and AWS conversations as connections between relational, structural, and cultural elements became apparent.
3. Generating initial themes	Searching for shared meaning patterns across codes.	Initial clusters were descriptive and analytically unstable; rather than consolidating themes, the analytic focus shifted toward identifying recurring pedagogical practices
4. Developing and reviewing themes	Checking coherence and refining or collapsing themes.	Practices refined and compared across sites; alignment checked against Minimum Standards; recognition that practices were fluid and overlapping.
5. Refining, defining and naming themes	Identifying the essence of each theme and how it fits the overall narrative.	Established the 'palette of practices' as the central organising structure, integrating enactments, beliefs, and learner experiences.
6. Writing up	Producing a coherent analytic narrative grounded in data.	Writing as analysis; selecting evidence; constructing arguments situated in the cultural and policy context across and within the three schools.

The following sections outline the broader analytic journey, including the key decisions, challenges, and conceptual shifts that shaped the final analytic framework.

- **Phase 1: Familiarisation with the dataset**

I first organised and annotated all the data: fieldnotes, observation notebooks, interview notes and student-produced artefacts were numbered and collated. As I organised and managed the data, I gained new insights beyond my initial impressions.

In Shree Maya, interviews were not audio-recorded; therefore, handwritten notes were labelled and stored alongside other datasets, including children's activity materials**.** I transcribed the remaining 13 teachers' Nepali-language interview audio recordings into English. Navigating across languages forced me to reflect on translation choices and cultural nuances (Robinson-Pant and Wolf, 2016). I was constantly switching between Nepali and English, aiming to translate as accurately as possible while paying attention to tone, idiom, and culturally situated meanings (Robinson-Pant and Wolf, 2016).

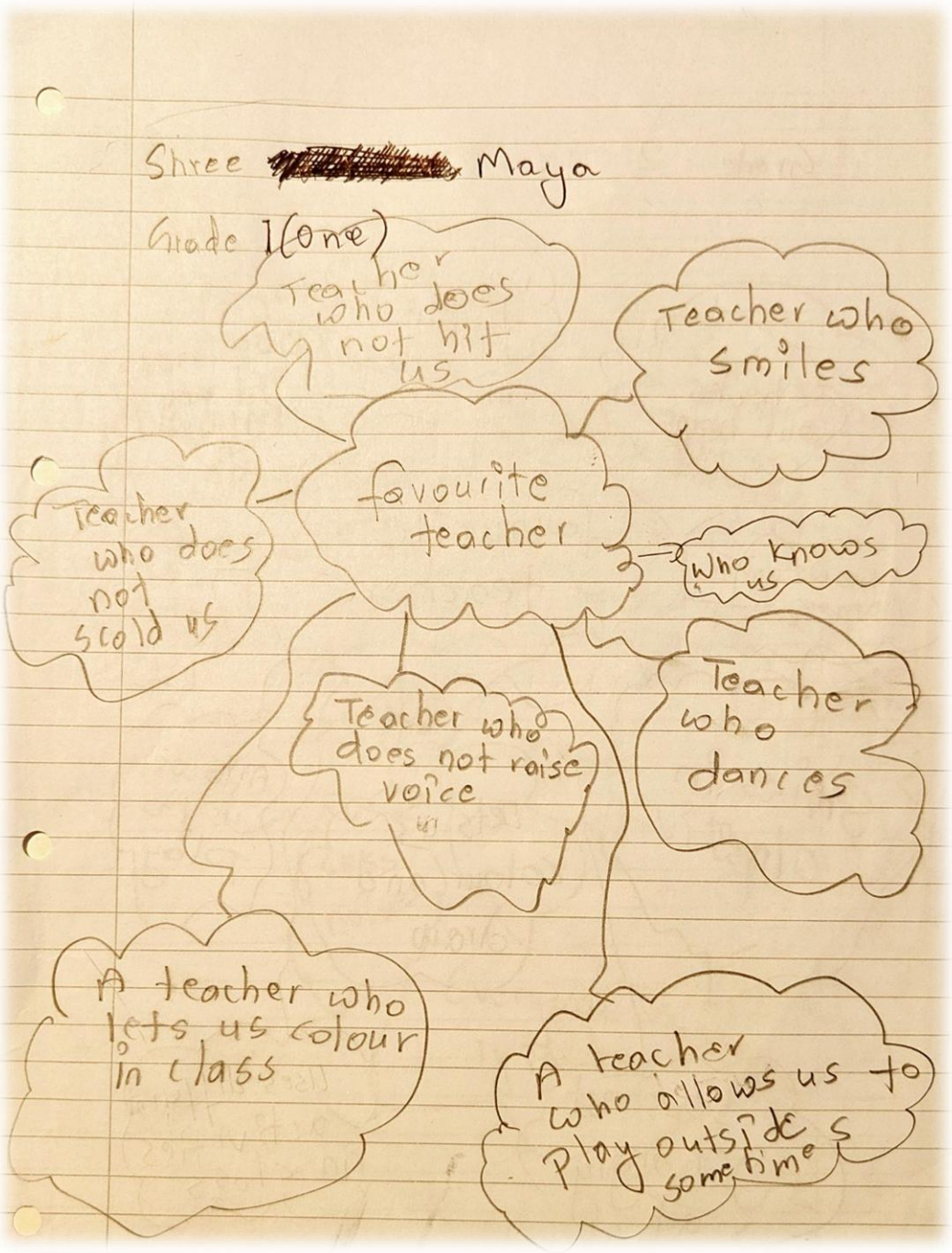
Through familiarisation across the dataset, I began to identify early patterns, trends, and connections. I started developing rough maps of the different facets of data and possible 'themes' and 'clusters of frameworks' (Braun and Clarke, 2022b).

At this stage, familiarisation functioned not only as immersion but as early analytic engagement with the relational nature of the dataset. It became clear that data often morphed into each other. The boundaries between observational insights, teacher reflections, and student experiences were porous, mirroring the fluid relational contexts in which the data were co-generated. Early impressions began to crystallise into patterns, but these remained provisional and open to reinterpretation throughout the data analysis process.

- **Phase 2: Coding as an iterative meaning-making process**

Coding was an iterative, recursive and multi-layered process (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). Initial inductive coding produced broad, interconnected generic categories that somewhat reflected the complexity of classroom life. I moved between latent and semantic coding using specific labels to demarcate the diversity of meanings in the dataset (ibid., p. 58). The classroom observations were coded reflexively by hand, working through the notes, writing initial codes (signposting evidence), and reflecting on my own thoughts (ibid.), see *Figure 15 and Appendix 12*.

Figure 15: Sample of initial coding of CWS notes



For the interview transcripts for Shree Siddhartha and Shree Saraswati, I generated initial codes in a Word document, as it was easier to navigate the transcripts and coding (see *Figure 16*). The interviews from Shree Maya were coded by hand, as I had written notes.

Figure 16: Example of initial codes generated for a teacher interview transcript

Saugat Transcript: Initial codes

Excerpt	Initial codes
I grew up in a Dalit family and so I was exposed to discrimination since birth. We grew up knowing we were different. When I was growing up, it was much more apparent and in your face than it is now. Not that much has changed now. But it is less overt.	Structural marginalisation, Experiencing oppression Shifting forms of discrimination
There are slight differences, positive changes compared to when I was growing up. For instance, my friends, peers used to eat separately, but now as friends we eat together. I don't know whether when they were young, they were told to do so by their families, or they did it on their own.	Shifting/evolving forms of discrimination Discrimination in practice Not eating together Cultural logics behind discrimination
Oh here, I feel it many times. I have wanted to raise this issues, sometimes, I do, other times, I let it go. This is why I haven't been eating lunch for almost three months. So the principal had a puja, that afternoon, we sat next to each other. I did not know she had a puja. I accidently touch her cup that had her tea in it. She did not say anything, she just said that she's changed her mind and will not drink tea. And left to go and wash her hands. This is not the first time it has happened. She knows very well, why she went and washed her hands.	Navigating discrimination Discrimination in practice Religious practices and discrimination Purity and pollution Being untouchable Silent/ culturally embedded discriminatory practices Persistence of discrimination

As coding progressed, I further developed individual codes, labelling the different aspects of data that captured actions, beliefs, meanings, and interactions (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). I coded both inductively and deductively since classroom experiences were complex and often overlapping (ibid.). The Minimum Standards (MS) (Schweisfurth, 2013) were used as a loose deductive framework to generate more analytical codes. However, teacher beliefs, classroom routines, student interpretations, and contextual conditions were highly intertwined. At this stage, early clusters often brought together classroom routines such as teachers reading aloud, asking questions, students responding in unison, and teachers checking for listening and engagement. Coding thus moved between descriptive and interpretive levels, with continuous revisiting of earlier decisions (Braun and Clarke, 2022b).

- **Phase 3: Generating initial analytical patterns**

During this phase, I started exploring how individual codes could be grouped into meaningful patterns, clusters, and themes. The analytic challenge became more

apparent, as traditional thematic boundaries could not adequately capture the dataset's fluid and relational qualities (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). Instead of fitting neatly into separate categories, practices, beliefs, and experiences continually bled into each other.

At this stage, some clusters brought together instances where teachers appeared disengaged, asked learners to read on their own, did not follow up on student talk, prioritised correct answers, and showed limited interaction while students talked among themselves.

These early clusters remained broad and descriptive rather than analytically distinct. As Braun and Clarke (2022b) caution, such clusters lack shared meaning. This prompted a conceptual shift. Rather than forcing the data into themes, I began to consider whether the analysis might be better organised around the pedagogical practices that consistently appeared across classrooms and were central to the study. These practices appeared to function as more stable analytic units. They integrated the contextual realities, what teachers did, the beliefs and cultural logics that shaped these actions, and how learners experienced and interpreted them. This reframing enabled the identification of existing practices and the understanding of why they existed as they did.

While reflexive TA guided the analytic process, the findings are presented as a 'palette of practices' (Barrett, 2007) rather than as conventional themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). This was because themes could not adequately capture the fluid and context-dependent nature of pedagogical routines observed across the three schools. The palette of practices, therefore, represents the analytic outcome of the reflexive TA process, integrating enactments, beliefs, cultural logics, and students' responses into a coherent interpretive framework.

- **Phases 4 and 5: Reviewing, refining, and naming analytic patterns**

The analytic breakthrough came from shifting focus from content-driven clusters to pedagogical practices as enacted routines. This revealed patterns that integrated actions, beliefs, and learner experiences. These reframing allowed practices to function as porous containers where cultural assumptions, contextual realities, and participant interpretations could meaningfully coexist.

To make this analytic shift transparent, the palette of practices emerged through iterative engagement with the dataset. The initial content clusters did

not capture the enacted, relational nature of classroom life across the three sites. This prompted a return to the dataset to re-code by attending closely to what teachers and children actually did, how these actions were interpreted, and how they were experienced.

Through repeated comparison along the horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes, a set of recurring routines began to stabilise. These included lecturing, questioning, assigning homework, managing classrooms, and conducting assessments. These routines consistently integrated actions, beliefs, and learner experiences, and therefore formed analytically coherent categories that became the palette of practices (Barrett, 2007):

- Use of lecturing and reading the chapter together
- Use of questioning and repetition
- Assigning homework
- Ways of managing classrooms
- Use of assessments

After much interrogation, each practice encompassed not only what was done but *why* it was done, how it was understood, and how it was experienced by learners.

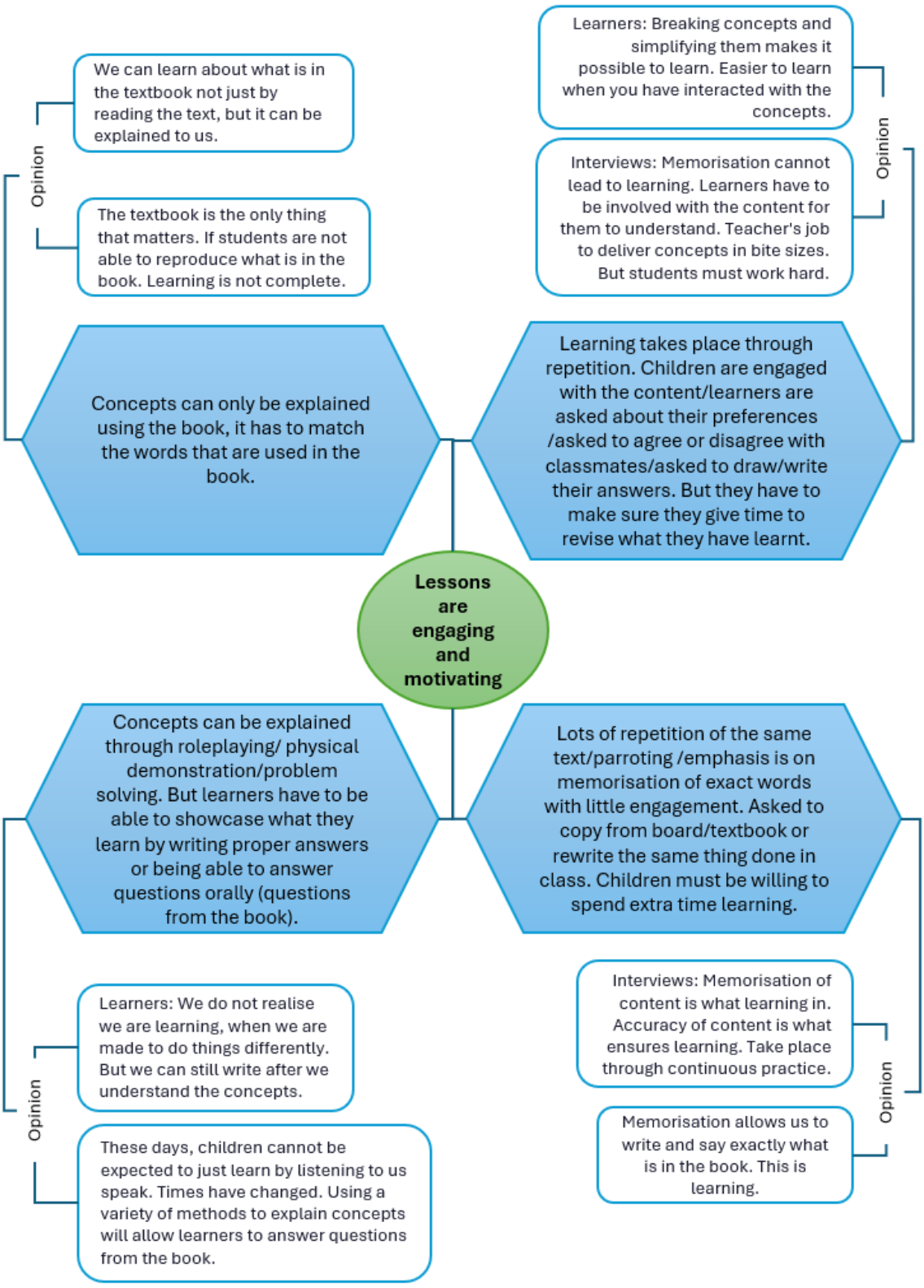
Each practice was interpreted and analysed by examining how it was enacted and shaped by structural, contextual, and relational factors (the pedagogical nexus). The practice was then analysed through the lens of the shared cultural beliefs and logics that helped sustain it (the onto-cultural perspective). These interpretations were traced across the horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes of CCS to understand how pedagogical practices are practised and experienced within their contextual, policy-mandate, and temporal settings.

As I reviewed each practice, I analysed its appearance in classroom observations, teachers' accounts, learners' experiences, and my field notes (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). This iterative approach enabled comparisons within and across schools, highlighting both shared routines and contextual variation.

Additionally, the refinement involved comparing practices against Minimum Standards. This framework helped determine how practices supported, conflicted with, or complicated the implementation and vision of reforms such

as learner-centred education. Importantly, it retained the contextual nuances influencing teachers' and learners' daily experiences and practices. An illustration of this thinking is captured in the mind map presented in ***Figure 17***. As a way to contextualise each of the Minimum Standards, I used policies which included the National Curriculum, the SESP (MoEST, 2022), the Education Act (1971b), the Teacher Service Code (TSC) (2000) and relevant laws, provisions and regulations along with the Nepali subject textbooks to analyse and unpack the palette of practices.

Figure 17: A mind map of the trends that I started identifying through the palette of practice across the MS1



The conception of a palette of practices facilitated not only the addressing of the research questions but also comparisons across CCS axes. They included horizontal comparison (across and within the three schools), vertical comparison

(from global and national policy to classroom practice), and transversal comparison (locating practices within temporal and historical shifts) (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

Drafting of the findings continued the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). As I wrote, I revisited earlier coding decisions, refined the palette of practices, and strengthened the links across the horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes. The process of abstracting evidence was iterative and reflexive (ibid.).

Ensuring the trustworthiness of data

Having outlined the data generation and analytical processes, this section reflects on the quality and trustworthiness of the data in the study. Drawing on Tracy's (2010) quality standards for qualitative research, the discussion focuses on credibility, including 'thick' description, crystallisation and multivocality.

One key criterion is how 'thick' data was generated by having spent substantial amounts of time embedded in each school. This helped "ascertain tacit knowledge, manifested in nuances of nods, silences and humour" (ibid., p. 843). Data were generated through multiple methods, including interviews, observations, and conversations with children and fieldnotes (ibid.). Together, these methods produced detailed accounts of the sociocultural and pedagogical contexts shaping classroom practices. These descriptions supported an understanding of how meanings were negotiated by the teachers, students, and me.

Another criterion is the crystallisation approach, which "centres on understanding the research and researcher position to intimately view the process with an openness that allows discoveries to unfold that would otherwise be lost" (Stewart et al., 2017, p. 1). This was supported by using multiple methods, participant groups, and theoretical perspectives. This enabled engagement with multiple perspectives, supporting comparison and interpretation of teaching practices and the meanings attached to them (Tracy, 2010). I chose to use crystallisation instead of triangulation as the goal of the study was not to provide a singular portrayal of what happens inside Nepali classrooms, but rather, was to engage and open up a more "complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding" of the phenomenon (Tracy, 2010, p. 844).

A further criterion, multivocality (Tracy, 2010), complemented crystallisation by ensuring that participants' voices shaped the interpretive process. This was achieved by including the experiences and voices of both teachers and learners across differing personal and contextual realities. Their accounts were central, shaping how data were co-generated through conversations, classroom interactions, and creative activities. These multiple voices helped highlight the various interpretations of teaching and learning practices, avoiding one-dimensional accounts. I also partly incorporated member reflections (ibid.). In Shree Maya, the teachers actively guided me on what to include and exclude in my notes during interviews. For interviews at Shree Siddhartha and Shree Saraswati, I shared the transcripts with the teachers, who then provided feedback and identified areas for adjustment. These collaborative exchanges strengthened the reflexive analytic process.

Overall limitations and reflection on the chosen methodology

This study's methodological strength lies in its ability to generate rich data over an extended period. It used flexible approaches within a research design that was both robust and adaptable (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2020). The use of multiple methods enabled engagement with diverse perspectives, including those of teachers and students, across both pedagogical practice and discourses (Alexander, 2000; Tracy, 2010).

However, the study also has clear limitations. As a sole researcher, my capacity to be present in multiple spaces at once was limited. All interpretations are therefore filtered through my perspective, shaped by the specific moments I observed and the relationships I built (Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013). For instance, translating interviews from Nepali to English was demanding, and I continually questioned my ability to represent the nuances of participants' meanings accurately (Robinson-Pant and Wolf, 2016).

To acknowledge this, I integrated positionality and reflexivity as core components of the research (Carpenter, 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Shamim and Qureshi, 2013). I also shared my transcripts with teachers to make sure they were happy with it.

Certain practical constraints also shaped what was possible. In Shree Siddhartha, for instance, exam schedules reduced the time available for observations with

children; in Shree Saraswati, I was sometimes asked to assist with administrative tasks such as drafting letters. These trade-offs were part of the everyday realities of the research context.

Upon reflection, I realise that some issues raised by teachers, particularly their understandings of teacher success and quality education, could have been explored in greater depth. Similarly, opportunities for deeper reflection on assessments and the terminal examination process as indicators of success were sometimes limited. These issues were discussed, but further exploration would have enriched the analysis. I also recognise that additional creative tasks may have enabled a deeper understanding of how children viewed themselves as learners and what they believed constituted learning.

I still grapple with ethical issues: as a Nepali researcher, I do not want to feed into the deficit narrative, but I also do not want to represent something that does not reflect reality. However, the iterative process of data analysis, reflections and decisions on research design and ethics has helped make this study multilayered. As Rogoff reminds us, learning and research are "processes of transformation through participation in sociocultural activities" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 51). This perspective reinforces the strength of this study: its commitment to understanding pedagogy as culturally situated and dynamically co-constructed (Alexander, 2000).

Preface to Findings chapters

In line with Alexander's (2000) definition and the theoretical framing of the study, the Findings chapters present an analysis of the data. This analysis will include both the 'act of teaching', the observed teaching-learning practices, and the 'discourse' behind this act of teaching. The discourse encompasses teachers' and learners' perceptions of learning, the reasons teachers use specific techniques, and the values underpinning certain opinions as well as how learners negotiate and navigate these practices.

The data analysis reveals that, despite contextual variations among the three schools, a set of shared practices emerged when viewed from a broader perspective. However, pedagogical variations were found not only across schools but also within the same institutions. These practices together contributed to developing a deeper and more holistic understanding of teaching-learning processes and how both teachers and learners actively participated in, shaped, and were influenced by them.

I will refer to this range of shared practices involved in the teaching-learning processes as a *palette of practices* (Barrett, 2007), symbolising that although these practices were shared, they were also unique depending on how they were used. In the classrooms I observed, these practices frequently merged, overlapped, and morphed into each other, making clear distinctions difficult. Like any palette, the significance lies not only in the individual 'colours' but in how they are combined and applied. Identical practices can produce profoundly different textures, ranging from cruelty, distrust, and fear to curiosity, care, and compassion, depending on how they are brought together in everyday interactions. Importantly, this same palette of practices recurs across the Findings; what varies across chapters is the analytic lens brought to these practices. Each chapter returns to overlapping episodes to analyse different dimensions of classroom life through different analytic lenses.

It is also important to recognise that the canvas on which this palette is applied already has an underlayer: the resource constraints and structural and contextual realities discussed in Chapters *2*, *5*, and *6*. These constraints influence, shape, limit, and sometimes distort how the palette of practices is manifested, reminding us that pedagogical variation is never created on a blank surface but on one already marked by material realities. What emerges on this

canvas are pedagogical practices shaped through the interplay of practice, belief, and material conditions rather than existing in isolation.

The palette will include the following practices:

1. Use of lecturing and reading the chapter together
2. Use of questioning and repetition
3. Assigning homework
4. Ways of managing classrooms
5. Use of assessments

I use Schweisfurth's Minimum Standards (MS)(2013) as an organising framework for arranging and presenting the analysis of this recurring palette of practices across the Findings chapters. The MS are not used as an evaluative framework/criteria against which the prevalent practices are compared and assessed; rather, the adaptability and flexibility of the MS enable in-depth exploration of practices where necessary. This approach helps avoid a deficit characterisation or an unhelpful binary of the teaching-learning practices and experiences.

The MS used to organise the findings is:

- Minimum Standard One (MS1): Engagement and motivation
- Minimum Standard Two (MS2): Mutual respect
- Minimum Standard Four (MS4): Dialogue
- Minimum Standard Six (MS6): Curriculum based on skills as well as content
- Minimum Standard Seven (MS7): Assessment not content-focused

Each Findings chapter is organised around one MS (except for *Chapter 11*, which combines two MS), which serves as the primary analytic lens, while drawing on the same palette of practices throughout:

- *Chapter 8* analyses the palette through Minimum Standard One (MS1: engagement and motivation);
- *Chapter 9* through Minimum Standard Two (MS2: mutual respect).
- *Chapter 10* through Minimum Standard Four (MS4: dialogue).

- *Chapter 11* through Minimum Standards Six and Seven (MS6 and MS7), which focus on curriculum and assessment.

These MS align closely with Nepal's LCE reform priorities (MoEST, 2022)(see *Chapter 2*) and address the study's research questions. A fuller justification for this selection is outlined in *Chapter 4*; here the standards serve simply to orient the reader to how the findings are organised.

The Findings are also situated within the CCS research design (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b) discussed in *Chapter 7*. Consequently, LCE reform mandates, along with relevant policy documents, operate as the vertical axis, providing the broader reform and policy discourse against which classroom practices are interpreted. The three schools constitute the horizontal axis, and through this comparison, the palette of practices becomes visible as a set of recurring, contrasting, and negotiated pedagogical routines (ibid.). Running across both is a transversal axis, representing the historical, cultural, and structural forces. This includes teacher beliefs, societal expectations, and exam-driven pressures that shape these practices. While these transversal dynamics appear throughout the Findings, their broader significance is theorised in the Discussion chapter (*Chapter 12*), particularly through the lens of karmic cycles.

The use of a key

In the discussion of this Findings section, to refer to participants, what they said and how the data were generated, I will be using the following key, see *Table 28*. For example, if I am to refer to a teacher participant, e.g. June, a teacher from Shree Maya Devi Higher Secondary School who said something during an Interview, I will write, June (T, Shree Maya, I). Similarly, a student from Shree Saraswati Basic School during Activity with Students shared will be written as (S, Shree Saraswati, AWS). Using this key ensures transparency and consistency in referencing participants and data sources throughout the findings, thereby helping readers interpret quotations and observations accurately.

Table 28: Referencing key for participants, schools and data generation activities used in the findings chapters.

School	Abbreviation
Shree Maya	Shree Maya
Shree Siddhartha	Shree Siddhartha
Shree Saraswati	Shree Saraswati

Role	
Student	S
Teacher	T
Data generation activity	
Field Notes	FN
Interview	I
Conversations With Students	CWS
Walking Interview	WI
Activity With Students	AWS
Classroom Observation	CO

Chapter 8. Findings: Part I

> *"There are two kinds of learning that take place: the real lessons that we learn through life and living, and then in school, we learn the content in the textbooks, which is important as it opens up new opportunities for us." (Nafisa, T, Shree Siddhartha, I)*

Introducing the palette of practices through *engagement and motivation (MS1)*

This chapter examines learners' engagement with learning in the Nepali context through the lens of Minimum Standard One (MS1) (Schweisfurth, 2013) , which emphasises that lessons must be engaging to pupils motivating them to learn. Learner engagement is a central component of LCE, and is "an indicator and outcome as well as part of the process" (Schweisfurth, 2013, p.145). The assumption is that motivation to learn exists when there is engagement.

The analysis revealed that engagement was not a uniform concept. For many teachers, engagement was equated with attentive listening, silence, task completion, and accuracy, reflecting a narrow interpretation of active participation. These practices were shaped by teachers' beliefs, cultural norms, and systemic expectations, and reinforced by structural pressures, including exam-driven accountability and societal values that prioritise measurable outputs over process-oriented learning. Such interpretations resonate with the pedagogical nexus, where beliefs and practices are embedded in cultural and systemic logics (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019), and with the onto-cultural perspective, which situates these enactments within broader cultural assumptions about what constitutes learning (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017).

At the same time, variations in practice, such as collaborative reading, questioning beyond the textbook, and dialogic exchanges, illustrate more nuanced interpretations of engagement. These adaptations demonstrate how teachers exercised agency to negotiate policy expectations and contextual realities, creating spaces for learners to participate more actively. Learners, too, were not passive recipients; their responses, negotiations, and peer interactions shaped what engagement looked like in practice, reinforcing the argument that engagement is co-constructed rather than imposed by the

teacher. These patterns will later be interpreted through the lens of the karmic cycle to examine how they sustain or disrupt recurring reform trajectories.

Contextualising engagement and motivation in national policies

A part of the context in which pedagogical practices are embedded is the 'policyscape' and its expectations (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b; Carney, 2009). The School Education Sector Plan (SESP) states that classrooms are expected to be "interactive" where "learning is not passive", and directs teachers to "develop" and "use more progressive pedagogical approaches that motivate learners to learn" (MoEST, 2022, p. 23). Although these expectations align with Minimum Standard One (MS1), the policy's language is vague, leaving it open to interpretation. As a result, the policy often remains at the level of discourse rather than practice, as it is disconnected from classroom contexts. While these policies set expectations for interactive and engaging lessons, evidence from classrooms suggests that these aspirations frequently remain symbolic (Ball, 1998). Additionally, the emphasis appears to be on how to learn proactively (MoEST, 2022) without consideration of cultural beliefs about what constitutes learning. Having outlined how engagement was understood along a spectrum, and situated these interpretations within the wider 'policyscape', I now introduce how the palette of practices was experienced and enacted in classrooms through using MS1 as the organising lens.

1. Palette practice: Use of lecturing and reading the chapter together

A commonly held belief among teachers across the three schools was that two kinds of learning occurred. *"One learning happened through life experience (padhera haina parera sikincha). While the other type of learning happened at school, which was through textbooks and learning the content to access better life opportunities, such as good job opportunities" (Namrata, T, Shree Siddhartha, I).* This belief influenced how teachers understood and approached classroom practices.

Although lecturing and reading together may appear to be distinct practices, in the classrooms observed they frequently merged into one another. Teachers shifted fluidly between reading aloud, explaining, and asking students to respond, meaning that learners experienced these as a single integrated routine, based on observation and fieldnotes.

When beginning a new lesson other than mathematics, most teachers across the three schools read aloud from the textbook and provided explanations as they progressed. They would read three to four sentences and then explain their meaning. When the text was in English, they read it in English and explained the content in Nepali. At Shree Siddhartha, teachers used a blend of Nepali and Awadhi. For younger children in grades one and two, teachers explained the content in Awadhi while the text was read in Nepali. This choice of language reflects how teachers adapted to local linguistic realities, showing that engagement was shaped not only by pedagogical routines but also by cultural and linguistic contexts. This approach demonstrates a narrow interpretation of engagement, in which engagement was understood as listening to and understanding the teacher's explanation.

Five teachers across the three schools read excerpts from the textbook and explained them once. This group of teachers asked their students to listen attentively to what was being said in class. They insisted that the students sit upright and look at the teacher while the teacher read and explained the chapter. Subhas spoke of how it was "essential for a student to give their undivided attention to understand what is being explained" (T, Shree Maya, I). Other teachers from all three schools reiterated this belief that learning occurs through listening. This belief illustrates how teacher perceptions of learning shaped classroom practices and demonstrates how teachers perceived engagement as attentive listening.

To ensure that the children were paying attention, these teachers would often ask questions in between the explanations and readings. In response, some students would explain what had been said; others who were not fully attentive would repeat the last few words spoken; and if unable to remember, they would remain silent. This shows how engagement was understood in practice, an interpretation grounded in teachers' own descriptions of the importance of attention and listening. Learners' responses, silence, or repetition indicate that they experienced engagement as responding to questions rather than participating.

A variation of the reading and lecturing technique involved teachers reading a portion of the textbook, after which students were asked to repeat the same text in unison. An explanation would then follow. My observation notes indicate

that in all three schools students often recited the words during choral reading sessions without actually looking at the book. Frequently, the students looked at the teacher or fidgeted, but still managed to recite the words. This was merely a reiteration of what was being said aloud. From these observations, it appears that teachers believed engagement in learning occurred through quiet listening, without distractions, or by repeating after the teacher. This is illustrated by students answering questions, such as when Tenzin stated, "If a student pays attention, they can always answer correctly" (T, Shree Maya, CO). It was also assumed that if a student could recount what was said, they were actively listening, which indicated their engagement in the learning process. This illustrates how engagement was understood in practice and shaped by teacher beliefs.

Many teachers (twelve) across the three schools paraphrased the texts from the chapters they read, using real-life examples where appropriate. They would then ask if it was clear and wait for students to respond. If students' responses were quiet, the teacher would either repeat the question or re-explain. To ensure that learners were engaged with the text, this group of teachers was often observed asking learners to *man manai padha* (read together with the teacher, without reiterating the text aloud). Teachers in grades one and two from all three schools insisted that children use their fingers or pencils (*aula rakhera padha*) to track the text as it was being read aloud in class. Chetana, from Shree Siddhartha, stated during how "children would be practising recognising letters and words if they read along with the teacher" (T, I), a sentiment echoed by others. Based on my observation, many of the children followed these instructions. However, there were also instances in which they looked out of the window when it was available or played with their friends. From these observations, engagement was equated with responses or following instructions. The learners' mixed responses also demonstrate how they were actively negotiating their learning experiences and not just reacting. This shows how engagement was understood in practice and shaped by teacher beliefs.

Within the practice of lecturing and reading together, teachers employed another variation with older children. This involved frequently asking questions after an explanation. Everyone would respond in unison, unless they were individually asked to answer. The questions were often closed-ended, such as,

"Why did Siddhartha Gautam leave home?" or "What did the old man do?" The responses were noted as being immediate in most of the observed lessons. When the students did not know the answer, the class would fall silent. "Being silent is better than answering incorrectly" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). Kopila (T) from Shree Siddhartha remarked how this method of questioning was the most "convenient way of ensuring that children listened in class." Here, engagement was understood not only as listening but also as responding to questions quickly about the text. The focus on recall may contradict the notion of meaningful engagement.

Another variation of lecturing and reading together involved students reading sections of the text turn by turn, followed by the teacher's explanations. The same set of five teachers across the three schools emphasised the importance of correct pronunciation. It was common, across all three schools, for students to read the same passage aloud individually. The teacher would often stand beside the child reading while the rest of the class became distracted and pursued their own activities. During one of the observations in grade five, a student tried pronouncing "aeroplane": the student's pronunciation was "aeropilane", and Jyoti (T) wanted it to be pronounced as "EropLAane" (CO, Shree Saraswati). She tried to say the word at least five times, but it did not meet his expectations.

The student then abruptly stopped responding and refused to look at the teacher, tears welling up. Across all schools, children displayed increasing nervousness, with voices trembling and softening when teachers repeatedly asked them to do the same task, such as answering a question or repeating a paragraph or word. Their anxiety appeared to increase each time teachers repeated themselves, with teachers' voices also becoming louder and somewhat agitated. The emphasis was again on pronunciation accuracy rather than the content. In this context, teachers thought that engagement in learning was focused on achieving correct pronunciation.

A different group of five teachers across three schools adapted the same palette practice in ways that demanded greater learner engagement with the same material being taught. They did not make students repeat the text while reading, nor was their focus on the accuracy of pronunciation. Instead, they emphasised in class the importance of understanding what was being taught.

Rashmee (T) from Shree Maya, for instance, was often seen reading part of the text. Then, she would suddenly point with her hand, either right or left, at columns of seated students, and the corresponding side of the class would all begin to read in unison. She emphasised that children "read and engage" with the text aloud (Shree Maya, CO). Rashmee (T), shared how this method "ensured her learners were actually reading the text" rather than simply "parroting the text" (Shree Maya, I). During these reading sessions, there were no side conversations. Everyone was involved in the reading process. These adaptations reflect a more nuanced understanding of what MS1 may entail in a Nepali classroom. The emphasis was on engagement through proactive reading rather than quiet listening or repetition.

On the other hand, Rupashree (T, CO) from Shree Saraswati asked her students in grades three and four to "take their time, to read"; she encouraged them to think about the "sound and the way it is written and then pronounce it". It was observed that the students actively asked questions about pronunciation or meaning during these lessons. This technique was also used by June (T) and Sneha (T) in Shree Maya.

When Samita (T) from Shree Siddhartha taught her lessons, she would read a portion of the text herself. Then, she would pick random students to read. After that, she would ask different students questions about the text or have them explain what had been read to the whole class. She stated that "this was the most effective way to ensure the children paid attention in such a large classroom as it forced them to remain attentive" (T, Shree Siddhartha, I). Observation notes indicate that the children listened intently to their friends while the reading was underway. If someone was soft, the learners would ask them to read more loudly. When asked why she started using this approach, she responded, "Trial and error, until I found a technique that helped me teach in class, interact with learners and get through the content without having to ask students to be quiet constantly" (T, Shree Siddhartha, I). Students in grades six and eight whom Samita taught spoke of how "it was impossible to daydream in her lessons because she did not follow a particular order. She would always pick students at random. So, it was essential to listen in class. Otherwise, it would be embarrassing plus would disappoint her" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). These

examples highlight how these teachers used similar approaches but made their lessons more engaging.

Learners' responses across classrooms demonstrated that they were not only reacting to teacher-led routines but also actively negotiating their learning experiences. In some lessons, students responded by repeating the last few words spoken, remaining silent when unsure, or reciting texts in unison without looking at the book. At other times, they looked out of the window or played with their friends even while following instructions to track the text with their fingers or pencils. During reading sessions, children listened intently to their peers, and when someone spoke softly, they would ask them to read more loudly. These mixed responses, including hesitation, distraction, peer support, or deliberate silence, illustrate how learners shaped what engagement looked like in practice through their own negotiations and interactions.

Together, these instances illustrate how teachers adapted similar palette of practices in different ways, shaping the nature of engagement in their classrooms. Engagement was understood along a spectrum. It ranged from attentive listening and repetition to more interactive and participatory forms.

2. Palette practice: Use of questioning and repetition

Within the palette of practices, questioning and repetition was widely used across schools to reinforce content and maintain learner engagement. This approach did not have a single form, as the questioning technique varied among teachers and how it was used. The goal of this technique was to help learners engage with the content.

A common version of this approach used by the teachers involved asking learners both closed and open-ended questions. Unless specific names were mentioned, the closed-ended questions would be answered in unison as a whole class across lessons across all schools. This was particularly popular when rehearsing exercises requiring students to determine whether statements were true or false. The statement would be read aloud in class, and everyone responded as a unit. It was observed that the children simultaneously marked or wrote the correct answer in their textbooks as they responded. When teachers asked open-ended questions related to the chapter, as found in the exercises in the book, it was common for each student in the class to be asked the same

question. The teacher would then stand beside the students as they responded to the question. The remaining children, in the meantime, would be distracted or talking among themselves. Consequently, everyone would reiterate the same answer. If answered incorrectly, the teacher would repeat the whole question or the last word of the question. Learners would then adjust their answers. This adjustment in answers would result from the teachers' rephrasing the question or repeating their answers.

All participating teachers considered this approach the most "convenient" method as it did not demand any "additional teaching materials" (T, Shree Saraswati, I) or "any preparation" (T, Shree Siddhartha, CO). Teachers said that this approach ensured that all students knew the answers. Again, a majority of the teachers, as discussed above, emphasised accuracy (answers had to be exact to those in the book). To teachers, this was an important part of being engaged in the learning process.

However, there were teachers from across the three schools who used this technique differently during lessons. Aarati (T) from Shree Maya would have pairs of students in grade three create and ask one another multiplication problems. They were asked to keep a score of how many times each one (in the pair) got correct answers. After about ten minutes, she would then ask the whole class multiplication problems, and the class would answer loudly in unison. If they made a mistake, Aarati would make the students work out the answer by giving them a couple of minutes and asking again. Here, the students had to work out the answers actively. These questions were based on the text-book, where sometimes, it would follow the chronological order and other times were in random order. Students were observed counting excitedly and being less distracted during this lesson.

During her moral education lesson in grade three, Sneha (T, Shree Maya) asked the children to formulate the most challenging questions related to the text. She reminded them that "all questions are good questions". She would answer each question and then ask the student whether her response was correct; if the student merely nodded without consulting the book, she would encourage them to reconsider. The children would then engage with the text and provide their responses. When Sneha answered incorrectly, the students would say, "She needed to try harder" or "She almost had everything, but something was

missing." This mirrored the way Sneha interacted with them when she asked them questions. The students were also noted for actively sharing their answers aloud. Although the answers were in the text, the students were 'discovering' them. Here, students were required to understand the text, generate questions, and then evaluate whether Sneha's answers were correct. These interactions suggest that learners were more actively involved and appeared motivated during the process. They were deducing the answers themselves.

Rupashree from Shree Saraswati used this technique to encourage students to solve problems. For example, in grade one, she would recite the Nepali alphabet in random order and ask whether it was correct. The children would immediately start reciting the alphabet correctly, loudly pointing out where the teacher had been incorrect. Similarly, during a Nepali lesson in grade two, she would deliberately answer questions incorrectly. The student who detected the mistake would also have to provide the correct answer. The student would be applauded with a big clap every step of the way. The children were enthusiastically involved in the class. They would be raising their hands with enthusiasm as they waved them to get noticed. They would be speaking loudly. Rupashree (T, Shree Saraswati, I) stated how, over the years, she has realised that children learn more effectively when they are enjoying themselves, so she tries to make lessons fun, and she employs such techniques during lessons. Such adaptations illustrate how engagement was understood in practice, shaped by teacher agency and reflection rather than policy prescriptions, exemplifying the recurring gap between reform aspirations and classroom realities.

Across these lessons, children were observed not distracted or talking amongst themselves. Rather, they were counting excitedly, raising their hands enthusiastically, waving to attract attention, speaking loudly, and seeking peer support. These reactions show how learners participated and negotiated within these questioning routines.

Together, these teachers adapted the approach of questioning and repetition across lessons, ranging from accuracy-focused recitation to more active forms that required learners to deduce answers, generate questions, and evaluate responses. These instances illustrate how teacher beliefs and preferences shaped the nature of engagement in their classrooms, and how learners responded differently within the same palette of practices.

3. Palette practice: Assigning homework

Homework was a key part of lessons across the three schools. It was used to reinforce learning, as it allowed students to review in-class material or complete textbook exercises, thereby increasing their familiarity with the chapter's content. It was observed that, at the end of lessons, most teachers assigned homework. All homework required students to read and prepare for a task planned for the next day, write their answers to the discussed questions in their copies, or rewrite their answers to the questions discussed. The homework here demonstrates how engagement extended into home environments, although teachers interpreted it differently; for example, some viewed homework as reinforcement of content, whereas others saw it as handwriting practice.

The group of teachers who explained the text after reading it aloud were noted to assign the most homework, specifically asking children to complete entire exercises in one evening. Classroom observation notes suggest that these teachers rarely provided feedback on the homework. There was no consistent method for assessing or collecting the assigned homework. Instead, they would randomly request homework on days when they wished to check it. Observation notes indicate variation in feedback practices. On days when homework was checked, comments such as "handwriting was not good enough" (Jyoti, T, Shree Saswati, CO) were commonly stated, and students were often asked to "redo the work" (Shankhar, T, Shree Siddhartha, CO). These interactions illustrate how teacher beliefs, part of the pedagogical nexus, shaped what was considered 'quality' work, often prioritising handwriting over content. Such a disconnect between policy aspirations and classroom realities perpetuates the karmic cycle metaphor.

Handwriting emerged as a central criterion for evaluating engagement in learning as teachers perceived neat work as evidence of effort. Jyoti from Shree Saraswati was observed crossing out multiple pages of student work and saying, "This is rubbish; do it again" (T, Shree Saraswati, CO). Students in grade eight from Shree Saraswati were often noted to be doing their homework for Jyoti sir in the mornings during class, and when asked, "he does not read our answers, he just looks at the quality of handwriting. So, it does not matter what we write, as long as he likes our handwriting" (S, Shree Saraswati, CWS). The children did not protest; they stood silently beside the teacher, heads down, as the teacher

often reprimanded them for poor handwriting. A grade seven student from Shree Siddhartha shared how "Kamal (sir's) focus was on the quality of handwriting rather than what was written in the answers" (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS). This emphasis on good handwriting, treated as an indicator of engagement, reflected teachers' beliefs about what counted as knowledge and learning.

As in previous examples, many teachers across schools prioritised handwriting quality and accuracy as evidence of hard work and thus engagement with learning. But the key difference was that the amount of work assigned as homework was broken down into smaller tasks to be completed over time. Here, the teachers were observed occasionally reviewing the answers and marking them with a tick, but no comments were provided. They often spent about fifteen to thirty minutes (out of forty or forty-five minutes) of lesson time correcting the assignments. At other times, they did not collect the homework. Occasionally, answers were discussed in class, requiring students to correct themselves. Teachers encouraged children to use the same wording as in the text. Students who completed their homework would be more likely to have their work checked or to provide answers. Conversely, students who had not done their homework would sit quietly and not engage in this homework-checking process. These practices reflect how students did not engage with learning unless their homework was complete, making it almost a condition of participation. I will now turn to how homework was used differently.

Unlike teachers who focused on handwriting and accuracy, some teachers used homework to interact with learners and support their understanding. Sneha, June, and Rashmee from Shree Maya, as well as Samita from Shree Siddhartha, were observed collecting and correcting homework regularly. The students were often noted as coming to discuss their answers with the teachers during breaks. In one instance, a grade four student approached June (T, Shree Maya) during lunchtime and asked her how else the answer could be written. Sneha (T, Shree Maya) and Rashmee (T, Shree Maya) frequently sat with their students during lunchtime, offering feedback on improving their answers.

Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha), on the other hand, approached her homework differently by adapting to the large class sizes. She stated in interviews how the large number of students made it nearly impossible to correct all her students'

work. Therefore, homework would have to be submitted on alternate days for different sections of the class. Samita would then discuss the feedback in class, highlighting general trends and common areas of mistakes. The class would collectively discuss how to strengthen the answers. It was also noted that, if necessary, she would speak to students individually if their quality of work was deemed not "good enough" (T, Shree Siddhartha, CO). To ensure the accuracy of answers, students were expected to produce responses in their own words and assess them. Samita discussed how it was crucial for her as a teacher to ensure that all her students could express themselves in their own words, as this "enabled students to think for themselves, something that does not occur when one copies from the textbook" (T, Shree Siddhartha, I). In this manner, teachers utilised homework to emphasise the focus on what they considered necessary to further enhance learning.

This section illustrates how there was a variation in how homework was perceived, given and received. It reflects deeply embedded values and beliefs around how learning was considered. The values and perceptions were then reacted to and negotiated by learners.

4. Palette practice: Ways of managing classrooms

Classroom management was understood differently across the three schools, shaping how teachers interpreted engagement and motivation. Most of these teachers associated silence with classroom management. At Shree Saraswati, the small student body meant teachers rarely had concerns about noise, and teaching extended beyond the classroom; therefore, classroom management was not considered necessary. In contrast, teachers from Shree Maya and Shree Siddhartha frequently emphasised the importance of effectively managing their classes.

For a group of teachers in Shree Maya, classroom management was centred almost entirely on maintaining silence. They described "controlling the noise level" as the primary means of ensuring that students listened and therefore learned (Subhas, Shree Saraswati, I). If students were quiet and remained seated in one place, it indicated that they were attentively listening to the lesson (Bipana, T, Shree Maya, I/CO).

The teachers emphasised maintaining low noise levels. Subhas (T, Shree Maya) was regularly observed assigning work to students in grade four and then sitting in the corner of the classroom using his mobile phone. Tenzin (T, Shree Maya) also consistently reminded students across the grades he taught to be quiet and he only read the content. The teachers did not engage with or manage students' seating arrangements, and students typically sat with the same friend each day unless they had had an argument with them.

Students in grades one to four at Shree Maya greeted these teachers with "Good morning, how are you, sir/ma'am?" regardless of the time of day, and many teachers responded with a greeting. However, they did not engage in conversation with the students and went straight to the lesson. Students would briefly follow instructions to remain quiet, but eventually resumed speaking. Both Subhas (T) and Tenzin (T) remarked that their primary responsibility was to ensure that learners remained quiet, as this would "guarantee their learning" (T, Shree Maya, I). They mentioned several times how a "noisy classroom reflected ineffectiveness as teachers" (Tenzin, T, Shree Maya, I).

Here, engagement was equated with silence, and this shaped the nature of their routines during lessons. Although the classrooms were orderly in terms of sound, teacher–student exchanges centred mainly on reminders about quietness, and students completed much of their work independently. Students across the grades who worked with these two teachers (Tenzin and Subhas) repeatedly mentioned how it was "impossible to talk to these teachers" (S, Shree Maya, CWS) and "this made their lessons less enjoyable" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). A student in grade four at Shree Maya once commented how "it felt like they had to ask for his (Subhas') permission to even breathe in class" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). For these learners, the quiet environment did not translate into opportunities for engagement during lessons.

Similar to Shree Maya, all teachers at Shree Siddhartha, except for one, equated silence with engagement and motivation to learn. The teachers were often interrupted in the middle of lessons due to excessive noise levels. To manage, they would either try to exert their authority as teachers by ordering them to be "QUIET" (Namrata, T, Shree Siddhartha, CO) or saying "You all want to do everything but study, you are terrible students, not motivated to do well in life" (Kamal, T, Shree Siddhartha, CO). The assumption that "a teacher's job is not to

manage student behaviour, or motivate them, it is to teach" (Tenzin, T, Shree Maya, I) was shared by most of the teachers across the two schools. The emphasis on the students being quiet in Shree Siddhartha was a practical measure as well, as the classes were highly populated and rooms were large, so noise meant children at the back would not be able to hear what was being taught.

On the other hand, other teachers did not equate silence with classroom management. June, Rashmee, and Sneha, (Ts, Shree Maya), would enter the classrooms with smiles. They would engage in conversations with their students after greeting them. These conversations included both learners and teachers discussing their days, their families, and other topics. Different students would be asked on different days or given the choice to share in class. All three teachers shuffled students' seating arrangements once a week. The children were free to move during lessons. They also implemented a 'job chart' across grades one to four, where different students had designated responsibilities for a week, which would then rotate, such as collecting homework or cleaning the classroom. The responsibilities were jointly decided every Sunday, at the beginning of the week. Students would volunteer for various roles. As a result, students were engaged in learning as they "felt free and could be themselves" (S, Shree Maya, AWS).

A classroom ritual (Alexander, 2001) that appeared to be effective in motivating learners was the use of clapping, as seen in June (T, Shree Maya), during her lessons. To illustrate this, I present the following observation notes.

> ***Observation notes-11/02/2024-June-Science-Grade Four (T, Shree Maya, CO)***
> *Student: Ma'am, since we did not finish our work today and were also very noisy today, will we not get our usual round of applause?*
> *June: Why were you not able to finish work?*
> *Student: Because we tried to find the right answers for the questions, and the answers were not in the book. We had to write in our own words. This meant we had to discuss it with our partners.*
> *June: Is that why you thought the class was noisy today?*
> *Student: Yes.*

> *June: Facing the whole class, all of you will get a round of applause because you worked very hard to find the answers to these difficult questions. It does not matter if you finished it or not, what matters is you all tried very hard. Remember, when you talk in my class, it is not noise.*
> *With this, she starts clapping, and the rest of the children join in grinning at one another.*

A student commented how she felt she could "breathe and laugh as loudly as she wanted to in June's class without worrying about getting into trouble" (S, Shree Maya, AWS). She further added that "this allowed me (her) to focus on what was being taught in class". Sneha (T, Shree Maya, I) said how she felt that if her children were responsive and active in class, it meant her lessons were "enjoyable" and students were "learning". This shows how teachers' beliefs influenced how students would be engaged or not.

Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha) had a specific way of managing the classroom. She planned the seating arrangement for the students. The students would change their seats every week to ensure that everyone got a turn sitting at the front. When the class became increasingly noisy, Samita would break into an impromptu poem and engage in dialogue with the students, but in rhythm. This would encourage the students to engage with her, reducing the noise in the classroom:

> ***Observation notes-05/03/2024-Samita-Nepali-Grade Six (T, Shree Siddhartha, CO)***
> *Samita: Alas! My dearest students are not listening to me. Maybe it is because they know everything and do not need to listen, maybe they feel tired, or maybe I am too soft.*
> *Students started becoming quieter, and they responded in unison:*
> *No, no, we will listen to you; we were just distracted. Now you have our attention.*
> *Samita: Are you sure?*
> *Students in unison: Yes, we will listen to you.*
> *Samita: Why?*
> *Students in unison: Because when we talk, you listen, and when you talk, we listen to you. This is our most important class rule.*

Samita: So you remember!

Samita smiles and the students smile back

The children who were taught by Samita shared how her lessons were "fun" and they "were not afraid", which "made them want to learn in class". A student in grade eight said how she "always felt heard in Samita (ma'am's) lessons". Students across these grades spoke about how she gave them the option to choose a "fun activity" one Friday a month. This was also noted in the observation notes. In instances when the noise level in the classroom did not decrease, she would stop teaching and engage the students through a different activity that was not related to the lesson (such as a singing competition), stating that they would resume the lesson the next day. This was also noted in the observation notes. Learners were able to tell Samita when they did not feel like studying.

Samita's method demonstrates a contextual interpretation of MS1(Schweisfurth, 2013), emphasising engagement and motivation by responding to students while maintaining her authority. In these sections, we observe teacher responsiveness; they are engaged in the moment and respond rather than relying on a single setting. Learners were able to tell Samita when they did not feel like studying. These practices, embedded in local cultural forms such as poetry, reflect approaches not explicitly anticipated in policy.

These examples demonstrate how engaging in maintaining silence was counterproductive in terms of engaging and motivating learners (Schweisfurth, 2013) . When learners were positively reinforced or given the space to be "free", this increased their focus and motivation to learn. This again shows how teachers' beliefs influence whether students are engaged, reinforcing the embeddedness of practice and belief (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017).

5. Palette practice: Use of assessments

The most important aspect of schooling and learning was considered to be student performance in assessments. In this section I examine how assessments were used to engage and motivate learners. I focus on the beliefs of teachers regarding assessments, which in turn influenced how they took place.

It was evident that teachers who emphasised the accuracy of content believed that learning was knowing the textbook content. Assessments, across the three

schools, comprised written exams. To them, this was the "only thing that mattered" (Saugat, T, Shree Saraswati, I), as "students' competence was based on how well they could perform in exams" (Aasma,T, Shree Maya, CO). Therefore, the exams became the centre of driving the learning and motivating learners.

Assessments, such as exams, were often positioned as motivators for students. The principals in Shree Saraswati and Shree Maya would remind students to "start revising for terminal exams" during morning assemblies. The emphasis was to ensure that all students "get good marks" as this would "reflect learning" (Nafisa, T, Shree Siddhartha, I/CO). Even teachers who did not associate learning with memorisation of content in the textbook spoke of the "importance of exams to motivate learners to work hard" as it "would give something for the learners to work towards" (Rashmee, T, Shree Maya). The motivation was that "learning would have something tangible to show if a student did well" (June, T, Shree Maya, I). Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha) spoke about how exams were almost always used as "incentives by teachers to make students memorise the text rather than focus on the actual teaching" (I). June (T, Shree Maya, I) spoke of how the "emphasis of the government on ensuring children have basic numeracy and literacy skills on the basis of exam scores has led teachers to become even more tunnel-visioned and make them study for exams and not teach them".

All teachers across the three schools noted that this was also valued by parents and that their students' exam results, in turn, motivated learners to "study hard and prepare" for exams (Tenzin, T, Shree Maya). Additionally, the other rationale for exams and assessments was that they would "prepare learners to later on appear for civil service exams or entrance tests for medical or engineering programmes" (Milan, T, Shree Saraswati, I). Again, passing these high-stakes exams guaranteed opportunities to establish a career and income.

Children across the grades and schools spoke about how essential it was for them to do well in exams. A grade three student in Shree Maya shared how she memorised the answers for her social studies exams without actually understanding the content. She spoke of how "the teacher gives us a set of questions that will come in exams, in the order they will come in, so I just memorise everything. I find it difficult to read, but I do okay in exams because I

memorise it beforehand" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). This was a commonly practised way of doing well in exams. Children in higher grades, in grade seven and eight, spoke about how "exams would define their futures" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS).

Therefore, the emphasis was on 'doing well' in exams rather than understanding the content. This contradicts the essence of MS1 (Schweisfurth, 2013) as the exams were used as a medium to 'know the content', rather than engage with the content through understanding. It motivated learners to get good marks but it was not necessarily a reflection of their knowledge about the content or overall learning. However, this aligned with shared assumptions and values in which learning was equated with exam marks.

Summary

The findings in this chapter directly address the research questions by discussing how engagement and motivation (MS1) were experienced, negotiated and practised in the classrooms. Further, the chapter unpacks how beliefs of both teachers and students shaped these practices.

At the same time, variations in practice, such as collaborative reading, questioning beyond the textbook, and dialogic exchanges, illustrate more nuanced interpretations of engagement. These adaptations demonstrate how teachers exercised agency to negotiate policy expectations and contextual realities, creating spaces for learners to participate more actively. Learners, too, were not passive recipients. Their responses, negotiations, and peer interactions shaped what engagement looked like in practice, reinforcing the argument that engagement is co-constructed rather than imposed by the teacher.

These patterns illustrate how engagement practices, whether reinforcing compliance or fostering dialogic participation, feed into the broader karmic cycle of reform: when engagement remains narrowly defined, the cycle persists; when teachers and learners co-construct more interactive spaces, the cycle offers potential for disruption.

Chapter 9. Findings: Part II

Introducing the palette of practices through *Mutual respect between teachers and students (MS2)*

This chapter examines mutual respect through *Minimum Standard Two (MS2)* (Schweisfurth, 2013), which emphasises that *classroom conduct must uphold dignity, rights, and non-violence*. Here, MS2 is used as an organising lens to structure the ways in which mutual respect appears across classroom practices, rather than as a benchmark for evaluating teachers.

MS2 states that "the atmosphere and conduct reflect mutual respect between teachers and pupils; conduct such as punishment and the nature of relationships do not violate rights" (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 146). Using this standard as a guiding principle enables a critical analysis of how mutual respect is practised in classroom interactions. This analysis is framed within the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and an onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017), which highlight that respect is culturally shaped rather than universally defined. Viewing the palette of practices through this lens highlights not only the 'act of teaching' but also the discourses that underpin it (Alexander, 2000), including the values and norms that shape understandings of respect and its enactment in classrooms.

Assessment is not presented as a standalone palette here. In my data, classroom assessment moments did not produce enough conduct-level evidence to analyse it through MS2. I cover assessment structure in *Chapter 11*.

Contextualising mutual respect in the national policies

National policy documents form an integral part of the context in which pedagogical practices are embedded. As discussed earlier, this policy landscape sets expectations for classroom conduct (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). In line with MS2, Nepali policy documents, including the SESP (2022/23–2031/32), curriculum frameworks, government reports, and teacher codes, consistently emphasise creating learning environments that uphold basic human rights and reflect tolerance and mutual respect (CDC, 2007, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022). These documents direct that classrooms should be "respectful to everyone and not exclusionary" (MoEST, 2022, p. 24).

The current governing policy further reinforces these national expectations around rights-based conduct (see Chapters *2* and *6*). The SESP emphasises the national commitment to equitable participation in the education system. To achieve this, one of its objectives is to "ensure equitable access to participation for all children … including those from economically and socially disadvantaged groups and children with disabilities" (MoEST, 2022, p. 23). Its guiding principles are "diversity, equity, inclusiveness, and student-centredness" (MoEST, 2022, p. 24). The education system recognises that every child is a whole person and that schools must focus on the holistic development of the child (MoEST, 2022, p. 24).

Further, the policy mandates that school environments respect all children and ensure equal treatment of teachers across caste, ethnicity, gender, and ability. These aspirations also align with the emancipatory rationale of LCE reforms (Sakata, 2023; Schweisfurth, 2013), which aim to redistribute classroom power dynamics and promote democratic values.

The emphasis in the policy documents is on ensuring equitable participation in education while fostering an environment free from fear through a friendly teacher–student relationship. The teachers' code of conduct requires teachers to maintain friendly relations with their students (Government of Nepal, 1971b, 2000). This emphasis on fostering positive interactions and reducing fear is presented as part of broader education reform efforts.

These initiatives also demonstrate the Government of Nepal's commitment to protecting children, in accordance with the UNCRC, which prohibits all forms of physical or mental violence (Government of Nepal, 2018; UNICEF, 1990, `Art., 2,19, 28). The Sixth Amendment to the Education Rules (Government of Nepal, 2002) prohibits both physical and mental forms of corporal punishment, and the Children's Act (Government of Nepal, 2018) has illegalised both physical and psychological punishment. Under the Act, individuals subjecting children to such punishments may face penalties of up to one year in prison and/or a fine of 50,000 NPR (GBP 247). These legal frameworks emphasise the importance of safeguarding dignity and rights in classroom interactions.

The SESP also recognises gaps in implementation and highlights the need to address shortcomings in teachers' roles and practices to promote a safe and productive environment with appropriate rewards and non-corporal or non-

humiliating sanctions (MoEST, 2022, p.119) (see *Chapter 6*). Acknowledging the gap between policy aspirations and actual implementation, it becomes crucial to examine how the concept of mutual respect was reflected in practice.

1. Palette practice: Use of lecturing and reading the chapter together

Lecturing and reading together was the most common practice across the three schools, making it important to examine how mutual respect was negotiated within this approach. Within this palette, respect was often framed as obedience. Several teachers equated respect with obedience, demanding "absolute silence" (Bipana, T, Shree Maya, CO) and "undivided attention" (Subhas, T, Shree Maya, CO) during lessons. Learners were expected to listen without any distraction. Subsequently, the teachers maintained formal relationships, often using punishment such as slapping or berating to enforce compliance.

Across the three schools, the same teachers viewed respect primarily as students giving their "undivided attention" (Kamal, T, Shree Siddhartha, I) during lessons. Teachers drew on phrases such as "understanding the content" and "attentive listening" to reinforce obedience as the basis of respectful conduct, rather than to emphasise academic aims.

They insisted on "absolute silence" (Namrata, T, Shree Siddhartha, CO), "deep reverence" (Tenzin, T, Shree Maya, I), and "unquestioning obedience" (Subhas, T, Shree Maya, CO). When expectations were not met, they would resort to physical punishment, such as slapping the back of the head or back (*pyatta hannu*) or insulting them by saying things like "useless" (Subhas, T, Shree Maya, CO). Here, the power imbalance between the children and the teachers was evident.

Despite the demand for compliance, observations showed that children across all grades were noticeably distracted in these teachers' classes. They engaged in side conversations, ate in class, or played Pokémon cards under the table. This showed a disconnect between teacher expectations and what occurred in practice. Such standards did not produce respectful conduct and instead contributed to students distancing themselves from the lesson. This pattern was built on earlier classroom management observations that showed how authority-

driven expectations undermined attempts to foster respect. It illustrates how teachers did not get respect simply because they demanded it.

A critical incident illustrates how obedience-based expectations shaped classroom conduct and atmosphere. Here, the teacher demanded "absolute silence" while he read and explained the texts, which are described below:

> ***Observation notes excerpts: 11/02/2024: Grade four (CO)***
> *The children are running all over the classroom.*
> *Students at the back: Please come and sit next to us.*
> *Pritha: Why, is there a reason?*
> *Students: No, we would like for you to sit next to us. Also, when you are sitting beside us, we will probably be less beaten by Tenzin sir.*
> *Sir is brought into class by a student holding his hand. Another student holds his book. He asks the student who brought him in to start reading.*
> *As she reads, the classroom becomes louder.*
> *Teacher: Quiet, listen to your friend.*
> *The class now becomes louder.*
> *Teacher: I am telling you to be quiet.*
> *The class becomes louder.*
> *Teacher: You all are useless children. You come here to do everything but study.*
> *The class becomes louder.*
> *Teacher: In a loud booming voice, I will teach you all a lesson.*
> *He starts whipping the children with his walking stick.*
> *A child gets hit at his stomach and yells.*
> *Teacher: That is what you get for not listening in class.*
> *The crying child: I was listening. He screams in pain. He takes his books and bag and sits next to his friend at the back who asked him to come and sit next to him.*
> *Now there was silence, and the teacher asked the children to write the question answers…*

Excerpt of conversations with grade four children after the class, 11/02/2024:

> *Miss, do you see why we wanted you to come and sit next to us? He hits whoever comes in his way. He (the child who got hit) is probably the only one who listens to him in class. The truth is the more he hits us, the*

> *more we will do everything but study in his class. Because he does not care about us.*

This critical incident shows the complexity of translating policy ideals into classroom realities. As discussed earlier, corporal punishment is prohibited under the Children's Act (Government of Nepal, 2018), yet it continued in this lesson as part of everyday conduct. It is also situated within broader beliefs about what a teacher can or cannot do, what is considered discipline, and what constitutes listening, which is embedded in both culture and structure (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). The incident also illustrated how it was experienced by everyone present.

Older children (grade three and up) across the three schools described studying with teachers who demanded unquestioning obedience and absolute silence. They noted that these teachers often arrived unprepared, relying on textbooks and exercises rather than engaging in interaction. In these classes, students conformed more to avoid angering the teacher than out of interest in the content. A grade six student (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS) shared:

> *"There are certain teachers whom I say good morning to every time I see them, no matter the time of day, because I don't want to get into trouble. I do not say Namaste, because it does not come from the heart."*

This highlights that mutual respect involves more than obedience; it requires a genuine connection between learner and teacher. Students described that respectful conduct involved teachers taking them seriously and engaging with them beyond obedience-based expectations.

Viewing children as a deficit

While expectations of silence and obedience shaped classroom interactions, another layer of complexity emerged in how teachers interpreted mistakes during the teaching-learning process. They would often blame the student for not meeting expectations. The teachers' comments moved to deficit narratives about learners and their families.

At Shree Maya, this was particularly evident. Teachers openly linked poor performance to family background, claiming children lacked the "right cultural values" (Aasma, T, Shree Maya, I/CO). Similarly, Tenzin (T, Shree Maya, I) repeatedly stated that "their lack of discipline and family background reflects

poorly on us as teachers". These sentiments were echoed in staffroom conversations where the school was described as a "'dustbin' attracting the worst children who have no intention of studying" (Pritha, FN). Such views illustrate how the teachers positioned the children beneath them as belonging to socially disadvantaged groups. These comments signalled a relationship in which students' dignity was questioned, reinforcing skewed power dynamics.

It was observed during many lessons at Shree Maya and Shree Siddhartha that teachers openly remarked that most children came from "uneducated" families and noted "there was no respect for the value of education" (Kopila, T, Shree Siddhartha, I). In a more extreme case, a grade three student who did not sit still was berated by Namrata (T) in front of the entire class: "No wonder you are useless; you are probably an unwanted illegitimate child of someone." The student quietly returned to his place.

Such opinions reflect how teachers in this category believed learners were deficient and undeserving of respectful treatment. This sharply contrasts with policy directives emphasising equal treatment and dignity for all children(MoEST, 2022).

In contrast, Rashmee (T, Shree Maya) discussed children's backgrounds as part of a lesson on alcoholism in grade four. After reading a section on its negative impact, she asked how many fathers drank excessively; all but one child raised their hands. Students then shared what happened after their fathers drank too much. In doing so, Rashmee created a space where children could share experiences without fear of judgment, thereby reinforcing an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect.

The emphasis on 'correct pronunciation'

Part of the palette of practices involved having students read aloud in class. Across the three schools, especially in Nepali lessons, teachers emphasised 'correct pronunciation'. This focus was also present in English, but in Nepali it was particularly evident. Children whose mother tongue was not Nepali seemed to be the ones who were judged the most:

> ***Observation notes: 05/03/2024 – Kamal-Nepali – Grade Seven (T, Shree Siddhartha, CO)***
> *Kamal: I have told you a hundred times when you read Nepali, it cannot*

> *sound like Awadhi. It has to sound like a proper Nepali person speaking Nepali. Alright, you try again (asks the whole row to read again). Students read.*
> *Kamal: No, stop. You are in grade six, and you still cannot pronounce these words. I believe you chose not to pronounce the words correctly because you would rather speak Hindi or Awadhi than Nepali. Maybe you would be happier being Indian.*

This excerpt illustrates how Kamal not only berated students for incorrect pronunciation but also questioned their ethnic identity and loyalty to Nepal. Such remarks positioned learners as culturally deficient. It also directly contradicts policy directives that ask teachers not to discriminate based on ethnicity (MoEST, 2022). This is also a reflection of the continued cultural hegemony present in Nepali society, where only a specific form of Nepali is considered 'correct', legitimising only that form of Nepali language as valid (see context in *Chapter 2*).

Similar dynamics were observed elsewhere. At Shree Maya, teachers in grades one and two repeatedly made students pronounce words when they did not meet this standard of correct pronunciation. When errors persisted, comments like "Maybe you should not speak *Newar*i at home" (Bipana, T, Shree Maya, CO) indicated that their mother tongue was being blamed for their inaccuracy. Such practices continue to contradict policy visions of making the education system free from discrimination. It also perpetuates students' disengagement with learning, resulting in poor performance.

In contrast, five female teachers, June, Sneha, Rashmee (Shree Maya), Samita (Shree Siddhartha), and Richa (Shree Saraswati) took a different approach. They promoted reading aloud, emphasising comprehension over pronunciation. Sneha (T, Shree Maya, CO) often urged students, "Focus on understanding the text; pronunciation is less important", sharing her own challenges: "Nepali was not my mother tongue; *Newar*i is, and I struggle to pronounce certain words." Mistakes were met with encouragement rather than frustration or anger. One nervous student was comforted when June offered to read together, encouraging her to start. After a few words, June paused, but the student continued reading. The class then clapped for her, saying she was "reading so well" (Shree Maya, CO). In such lessons, students were also fully engaged in the teaching-learning

processes. These approaches were culturally grounded but helped create mutually respectful learning atmosphere.

Students appreciated these teachers for their ability to listen, their flexibility and fairness, seeing these actions as signs of respect. At Shree Maya, children mentioned how June, Rashmee, and Sneha always arrived in class "prepared". Students in grades three and four shared that in June's class, they felt "more confident to read because they knew they would not be shouted at or hit for not reading well" (S, Shree Maya, AWS). Learners in grade four expressed that Rashmee and Sneha did not "judge their family" (S, Shree Maya, AWS) or think they were "worthless" (S, Shree Maya, CWS) and "useless". Meanwhile, students at Shree Siddhartha spoke of how Samita never dismissed their "ideas, requests, and needs". A grade seven student shared, "Samita ma'am notices immediately if we become distracted. She then asks what's wrong and changes things around if necessary" (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS). Observation notes confirm that she adjusted lessons when students were disengaged. At Shree Saraswati, students commended Richa's fairness, noting that "even though her son was in the same school, she treated him no differently from the rest" (CWS/AWS). These examples demonstrate that mutual respect was not merely about avoiding punishment but was actively negotiated through interaction and flexibility. Students interpreted actions such as listening, adapting lessons, and treating learners fairly as worthy of respect.

2. Palette practice: Use of questioning and repetition

Following the palette practice of lecturing and reading together, this section builds on those patterns of conduct. While negotiation created spaces for mutual respect in some classrooms, another common classroom practice, questioning and repetition, revealed contrasting dynamics in how respect was experienced, enacted or violated. This practice was widely observed across the three schools and often merged with lecturing and reading aloud. Teachers used questioning and repetition to reinforce content and maintain engagement, but their interpretation varied significantly.

For most teachers, questioning was rigid and focused on accuracy. Questions were often closed-ended, requiring answers that matched exactly those in the textbook. Responses were required to be instant, and mistakes were met with

visible frustration. Teachers such as Namrata (Shree Siddhartha, CO) sighed deeply when a grade two student hesitated, saying, "I think the only way for you to focus in class is if I become angry", before twisting the child's ear and warning, "Next time you make a mistake, I will hit you with a stick". Similarly, Bipana (Shree Maya, CO) repeatedly hit students on the head for incorrect answers, remarking that "in life, no one will offer them a job for trying; they must get it right". The questions were sometimes directed at the whole class or at groups, and at other times, posed individually. "This feels an almost hostile environment, where it felt like students were being grilled" (Pritha FN reflections).

These interactions created a learning environment where teachers valued the accuracy of answers, thereby reinforcing the power imbalances between them and their students. It also reinforced that learning was only when a student was quick and answered correctly. This did not create a mutually respectful learning environment.

In contrast, other teachers used questioning and repetition to encourage effort without making learners feel pressured to perform. Chetana (T, Shree Siddhartha) praised correct answers with "Good" or "Excellent" and reassured hesitant learners: "You try, see how much you can answer, and then I can help you" (CO). Rupashree (T, Shree Saraswati) reminded students, "It does not matter if the answer is wrong; it is important that you try" (CO). Aarati (T, Shree Maya) gently tapped a student's head during a multiplication exercise, saying, "I know you know this; let us do this together" (CO), and worked through the problem collaboratively.

Learners consistently valued these teachers. A grade four student explained, "I enjoy lessons where I feel free, where we don't get shouted at, hit, or made to feel useless for not answering correctly" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). Another remarked that in June's class she "could freely move around while doing exercises without getting shouted at". These accounts highlight how mutual respect was enacted through encouragement and collaboration rather than fear and punishment.

These contrasting approaches reveal how the same palette practice can either reinforce hierarchical norms or create spaces for negotiation and care. When

questioning was punitive, mutual respect was lacking. When collaboration was present, respect was actively constructed.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how questioning and repetition could produce contrasting forms of classroom conduct. The coexistence of punitive and collaborative questioning showed how these practices were not influenced by the symbolic policy rhetoric.

3. Palette practice: Assigning homework

This section builds on the argument that routines around homework shaped conduct and dignity. It explores how assigning and correcting homework shaped everyday interactions between teachers and learners. Homework was a key part of teaching and learning across the three schools, but unlike earlier practices, its assignment and correction showed little variation. The focus here is on how these routines were enacted as fair or humiliating conduct.

All teachers assigned homework, but the key distinction was in how they corrected it and provided feedback, again showing contrasting interpretations of what appropriate conduct looked like.

Observation notes indicate that across the three schools, most teachers did not consistently check assigned homework. They often asked if students had completed it, but rarely verified this. Some conducted ‘surprise checks’ (CO) on random days, and when homework was missing, punishments followed: students were berated, slapped on the head or wrists, or made to do squats. For instance, during a grade five science lesson, Saugat (T, Shree Saraswati) scolded students for incomplete work, calling them “useless and lazy” and warning they would “reach nowhere in life”. After class, learners shared that homework checks depended on the teacher’s mood, noting that even completed work could trigger anger if deemed “not done properly” (S, Shree Saraswati, CWS).

It was observed that across the three schools, most teachers were observed becoming angry when children’s homework did not meet expected standards. The most common criticism involved poor writing and presentation, particularly the lack of proper margins. Bipana (T, Shree Maya, CO) repeatedly called her grade two students “useless and lazy” for incomplete work and made boys stand for the entire class while holding their ears or do thirty to fifty squats. She also pulled on girls’ pigtails when they failed to finish tasks. At Shree Siddhartha,

Shankar (T) punished students by making them redo work and adding an undiscussed chapter's exercise. Students reported that homework felt burdensome, as only "favourite students" were exempt from punishment (S, Shree Siddhartha, Shree Maya, Shree Saraswati, AWS/CWS). Taken together, these instances were experienced as humiliating and unfair conduct during homework checking.

In contrast, a minority of teachers, June, Sneha, Rashmi, and Samita, checked homework regularly and engaged in discussions about written answers. Students sought clarifications enthusiastically, and one remarked, "I make sure I do June ma'am's homework because I know she won't shout at me for not having good handwriting." June expressed gratitude to her "children for taking the time to complete their homework" (Shree Maya, CO) while Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha) used peer feedback to review answers collectively (CO). These practices created non-punitive spaces in which students could correct their work without fear of humiliation. Taken together, these contrasting approaches show how homework checking was enacted either as humiliating punishment or as fair, non-punitive conduct.

4. Palette practice: Ways of managing classrooms

Building on *Chapter 8*, this section examines how the same routines shaped conduct and dignity, fostering mutual respect. Classroom management approaches were used to better understand how mutual respect is practised and experienced during lessons. The approach often determined the type of atmosphere, culture, and nature of interaction present in the classroom. Managing classes was recognised as an integral part of the teaching–learning process, embedded in all aspects of pedagogical practices and learning experiences. Additionally, there were variations in classroom management. Since each school exhibited distinct classroom cultures, presenting them as individual entities facilitates clearer engagement with how mutual respect manifested at each site.

Managing lessons in Shree Siddhartha

Given the large class sizes, classroom management was considered crucial to teaching and learning at Shree Siddhartha. Teachers' "utmost priority was to manage the noise levels" (Kamal, T, Shree Siddhartha, I). It was observed that

the higher the grade, the larger the number of students, and therefore the greater the challenge in controlling noise levels. These conditions shaped how teachers approached classroom conduct and influenced the practice of mutual respect.

It was observed that most teachers at Shree Siddhartha did not employ structured classroom management approaches. There were no seating plans or systematic routines, and aside from Kopila and Chetana, teachers often struggled to identify individual students due to the large class size. Lessons were frequently noisy, prompting teachers to spend considerable time issuing commands such as "Silence" or banging on desks and whiteboards to restore order. These measures produced only temporary compliance and often led teachers to focus on the front-row students, excluding those seated at the back. "Students at the back are often the least motivated and capable" (Shankhar, T, Shree Siddhartha, I) was a shared belief among many teachers in the school. A grade five student reflected, "I like sitting at the back because of my friends, but I feel invisible since Shankar sir only teaches those in the front" (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS).

It was equally important to note that the students across the grades repeatedly spoke about the importance of not openly challenging teachers' authority and even protecting them: "No matter what, a teacher is a teacher, life is happening to them, so we have to make sure that we do not make them feel bad or embarrass them in public. After all, as students we are younger than them" (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS).

In contrast, Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha) employed targeted approaches to manage her lessons. She taught grades six through eight and implemented a seating plan that rotated students' places on a weekly basis. She stated that this allowed her to "monitor all learners" and "ensure every student had the opportunity to sit at the front of the classroom" (I). Her priority was to "know each student by name and face" (Samita, T, Shree Siddhartha, I). According to her, "Through my years of teaching, I have realised that knowing students by name helps them feel less invisible, making it easier to manage lessons." Her lessons frequently involved collaboration, with students collectively establishing rules such as "When someone speaks, we listen," and "We raise our hands and wait for our turn to speak." It was also common practice in Samita's lessons to

agree on a set of consequences for certain behaviours at the beginning of the week, depending on the lesson. The following observation illustrates how these negotiated consequences were established in practice:

> ***Observation Notes: 03/03/2024-Samita-Nepali-Grade Seven, (T, Shree Saraswati, CO)***
> *Samita: Are you all ready for today's class?*
> *Students: Yes (in unison)*
> *Samita: You were supposed to have practised reading the chapter, and we are going to read it and then understand what it means. Okay?*
> *Students: Okay.*
> *Samita: Let us also establish what shall we do if one of us is not paying attention or if we talk to our friends too much?*
> *Students: We get hit.*
> *Samita: Let's determine how many slaps and where.*
> *Student: If someone is struggling to read because they have not practised, they get hit on the palm once. But you should not use a stick, you use your hands. It's not painful.*
> *The whole class laughs.*
> *Samita: A better place might be the back.*
> *Student: No, today, let's agree on the palm, once (in unison)*
> *Samita: Alright, and if we continue talking to our friends?*
> *Students: (In unison) you can twist our ears.*
> *Samita: It won't be too painful?*
> *Students (in unison): No, not at all. Also, when you twist our ears, it does not hurt.*
> *Samita: So, as a class, we decide that when someone does not focus, they will be hit on the palm once. Do you agree?*
> *Students: Yes, we agree in unison.*

This example illustrates how Samita managed the classroom through dialogue and collaboration. Students collectively agreed on consequences for inattentiveness, negotiating whether a slap on the palm or ear-twisting was acceptable. While corporal punishment remained embedded, its negotiated nature illustrates how respect was culturally mediated rather than universally defined, challenging normative assumptions in policy. It also shows how

conduct-based understandings of respect were shaped within locally accepted practices.

These positive comments were common among children who worked with Samita, as they unanimously praised her approaches. A grade six student (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS) remarked that "It was impossible to be noisy in Samita ma'am's class because she recognises everyone. It makes us feel more obliged to work harder in her subject." To her, being visible meant being accountable. Another student (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS) shared that "with Samita ma'am, we feel respected because she discusses everything with us; she will never hit us randomly. She makes sure we know why we got hit if we do get hit."

Students were critical of corporal punishment as a classroom management approach when used without "proper justification" (Grade 7, S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS/AWS) and strongly disapproved of its use. Learners from grades six and seven (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS), taught by Kamal, spoke of how he often used "unnecessary beatings" in class. A grade six student shared, "Sometimes it felt like he would hit us even if I breathe too loudly" (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS). During a discussion in grade seven on whether children should ever be hit, one student explained that "hitting was not the issue; the issue was the intention of the teacher." According to this learner, "The teachers who resorted to the most frequent beatings and punishments often did not like us. So, they hit us not necessarily because we did something wrong, but simply because they could not tolerate our presence" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). This sentiment was echoed by students in grades four, five, and eight, while younger learners in grades one to three spoke of how they "disliked being hit by their teachers" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). These examples exemplify how learners themselves defined respect through fairness and intent, an aspect absent from policy expectations.

In the broader school context, corporal punishment emerged as the most prevalent method for enforcing silence across classrooms, despite its prohibition under the Children's Act (2018). Teachers employed varying degrees of corporal punishment, from light slaps to more forceful strikes, often escalating with frustration. Male teachers were observed to strike male students with greater force than female students. Teachers including Namrata (T, Shree Siddhartha), Kopila (T, Shree Siddhartha), and Chetana (T, Shree Siddhartha) sometimes

brought a wooden stick to their lessons in grades one to four "to maintain classroom order" (Kopila, T, Shree Siddhartha, I). Namrata often used the stick during her lessons as a way to manage "student behaviour and noise levels". It is important to highlight that the effects of corporal punishment were brief, lasting just a few minutes. Except in Samita's lessons, students frequently reverted to their previous activities.

> ***Observation notes: 20/02/2024: Namrata-English-Grade Two (T, Shree Siddhartha, CO)***
> *Namrata walks around, waving the wooden stick in her hands.*
> *Namrata: In a booming voice, I want complete silence. You are here to study not constantly talk to your friends. I want you to copy the words written on the board three times each in your copies. I will ask you to spell it one by one.*
> *The children continue to talk amongst themselves.*
> *Namrata pulls a boy's hair and hits his head with her hand. The boy stops talking. But there is another group of children in the corner, busy talking.*
> *Student: Howls*
> *Namrata walks towards the child and hits him twice with the stick on his back.*
> *Namrata: Do you think this is a zoo?*
> *The student becomes teary-eyed and starts working.*

This incident illustrates how teachers used force to control classroom conduct, thereby undermining children's dignity and violating the rights set out in the Children's Act (Government of Nepal, 2018). Its persistence, despite legal prohibitions, reinforces how policies may not be effective in changing behaviour.

These practices and experiences starkly contrast with policy directives prohibiting corporal punishment, highlighting the symbolic nature of reform policies (Ball, 1998). They also illustrate how a seemingly straightforward law banning corporal punishment can manifest in culturally nuanced and unexpected ways, aligning with the thesis's argument for a better understanding of contextually negotiated pedagogical practices.

Managing lessons in Shree Saraswati

In Shree Saraswati, classroom conduct took a different form, shaped by the school's small size, closer interactions, and contrasting expectations around respectful behaviour. The student body at Shree Saraswati was significantly smaller than those at Shree Siddhartha and Shree Maya, comprising only twenty-nine students in grades one through eight. As a result, teachers felt less need to control classroom noise or behaviour. With grade one having the highest enrolment of seven students, teachers engaged with each student individually. No formal rituals or strategies were observed; teachers simply delivered lessons.

During lessons, they interacted through various conversations, resulting in less formal relationships compared with Shree Siddhartha. It was also noted that children in this school were more outspoken about expressing what they wanted to do in class. For example, grade five students proposed collecting rocks while studying different kinds of rocks in science, and they went out to gather them. Teachers here did not insult students' backgrounds, partly because parents were very involved in school affairs and sought clarifications if a student was unfairly punished. In contrast, it often felt as if teachers worked hard to please the students because they feared students would leave and migrate to nearby towns.

There were fewer instances of corporal punishment in this school, and students told me that teachers had stopped hitting them after my arrival. Nevertheless, some teachers expressed discomfort with what they perceived as "over-empowered" children, remarking that students "sometimes needed to be shown their place with a good beating" (Milan, Jyoti and Saugat, T, I, Shree Saraswati, I). Saugat (T, Shree Saraswati, I) further explained how "as a student, I (he) deeply respected his teachers to an extent where he was not even able to look them in the eyes. Therefore, the students of today were deeply disrespectful as they had been over-empowered and would easily challenge teachers."

These contrasting dynamics showed that classroom conduct was not uniform; some teachers used their own agency to follow or resist these expectations, while others continued to justify punishment. These differences revealed that respect was negotiated within local cultural logics rather than practised in a single way. They also showed how these cultural logics were themselves

contradictory, with teachers drawing on them to both limit punishment and defend it. Taken together, these dynamics questioned universal norms of teacher–student relations and what counts as respectful conduct in this school context.

For many children in Shree Saraswati, respect was not only about not being hit but also about teachers being present and engaged. Learners across grades three to eight consistently described teacher disengagement, noting that "teachers just did not care" (S, Shree Saraswati, CWS). A grade four student explained that teachers often failed to attend lessons, leaving children to "spend the class time playing with each other". In contrast, a grade seven learner remarked that teachers "only reminded us to study hard but never put in the effort to teach", sometimes using class time to prepare for their own exams (S, Shree Saraswati, CWS). These events were also noted in the class observation notes. Just as in the other schools, all children reiterated the importance of "protecting the honour of the teacher, regardless of how frustrating it was. After all, they also did not have it easy" (Grade 6,S, Shree Saraswati, CWS/AWS). These accounts suggested that although learners appeared to have greater freedom in classroom interactions, this did not translate into respectful conduct when teachers were absent or disengaged but still believed in protecting them.

Managing lessons in Shree Maya

In contrast to the more formal methods observed at Shree Siddhartha and the less structured practices at Shree Saraswati, classroom management at Shree Maya often involved relational strategies that students experienced as respectful, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Teachers such as June, Sneha, and Rashmee consistently greeted students through hugs, inquired about their health and well-being, and followed up on family concerns and circumstances. Students shared that, with these teachers, they "feel safe" and "forget all their problems" (S, Shree Maya, AWS/CWS), reinforcing a sense of care and belonging that they understood as signs of acceptance and being valued.

Rashmee (T, Shree Maya) introduced a daily ritual where students recited "*Hami asal bacha haun, man lagayum bhane chandrama chuna sakchaum*" ("We are good at heart, if we work hard and honestly, we have the possibility of reaching

the stars"). When the class became noisy, she repeated this affirmation, explaining that she wanted her children "to believe they are capable, no matter what their circumstances are" (Rashmee, T, Shree Maya, I/CO). Students said this made them feel "free" (S, CWS) and able to concentrate rather than worry about punishment, which they interpreted as another example of being encouraged and accepted.

Other teachers also had specific routines and rituals for classroom management. June (T) used applause to acknowledge effort, telling her class that "when you talk in my class, it is not noise" (CO). Sneha (T) encouraged learners to come and share their worries after class. The students interpreted this as a sign that "she cares for us like we are her own" (S, Shree Maya, CWS) and how their "voices mattered" (S, Shree Mya, CWS). These examples illustrate how respectful conduct was enacted through everyday gestures of recognition.

Unlike the relational strategies used by the three teachers June, Sneha, and Rashmee, most other teachers equated classroom management with enforcing silence. They seldom interacted with learners beyond textbook content and relied on punitive measures such as berating, slapping, or requiring children to perform squats. Across the grades, a common shared belief among students was that "many of the teachers who hit us for even having a wrong expression on our faces were doing so because they are frustrated in their own lives and so they take out the anger on us" (Grade 4, S, Shree Maya, CWS). Despite these efforts, lessons often remained noisy and learners disengaged, demonstrating that silence did not necessarily signal comfort or respect.

At Shree Maya, only June, Rashmee, Sneha, and Aarati consistently arrived on time and completed lessons, while others frequently arrived late or left early. Similar patterns were observed at Shree Siddhartha, where Samita, Chetana, and Nafisa were exceptions, and at Shree Saraswati, where Rupashree was the only teacher noted for punctuality. These behaviours signalled to students whether they were being taken seriously, in contrast to teachers who invested time in building respectful relationships. They also exemplify how structural influences shape everyday practices.

Taken together, these examples showed that respectful conduct was understood differently across the three schools. At Shree Siddhartha, respect centred on fairness, justified actions, and being seen; at Shree Saraswati, it was tied to

teacher presence and engagement; and at Shree Maya, it was linked to small gestures of recognition in a context where students' backgrounds were often criticised by other teachers.

Summary

This chapter demonstrates that mutual respect is not a fixed or universal ideal but a negotiated practice deeply rooted in cultural and systemic logics. While policy rhetoric presents respect as rights-based and non-punitive, classroom realities reveal contrasting enactments. These range from punitive measures such as slaps, ear-twisting, and verbal humiliation, often justified through deficit perspectives, to relational strategies like June's applause and Samita's rules, which were enacted as non-punitive classroom conduct.

These dynamics highlight the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) , where beliefs and practices intersect, and reflect the onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017)that positions respect within local meanings rather than global prescriptions. In doing so, the findings answer the research questions by illustrating how teachers' interpretations and everyday conduct influence what mutual respect looks like in practice, revealing the persistent policy–practice gap and the cyclical nature of symbolic reforms (Ball, 1998). Respect, embedded in everyday interactions, may serve as a culturally grounded opportunity to disrupt this cycle and reimagine reform trajectories.

Chapter 10. Findings: Part III

Introducing the palette of practices through *Dialogue and how it is practised in the classroom (MS4)*

I use Schweisfurth's (2013) *Minimum Standard Four (MS4*) to unpack what a contextually grounded dialogic teaching–learning approach looks like in the Nepali context. The standard states that *dialogue "goes beyond one-way teacher–learner transmission," giving learners opportunities to exercise, demonstrate, and develop their agency through respectfully critical questioning* (Schweisfurth, 2013, p.144).

In *Chapter 5*, I discussed how LCE education reform aims to transform an existing education system where learning is transmissive and often follows a banking model (Freire, 1996) into a transformative learning process. In this process, learners are not only integral to learning but also empowered and respected; they learn from experience and internalise democratic and inclusive values. One way to realise both the cognitive and emancipatory narratives is through dialogic pedagogical approaches (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Classroom talk (Alexander, 2018; Kim and Wilkinson, 2019) enhances learning as children actively engage with what is being taught by questioning, discussing, and interacting with it. Dialogic talk involves teachers and students building on each other's ideas to explore, debate, and challenge concepts, fostering shared understanding and higher-level thinking (Alexander, 2018, 2020). Conversely, non-dialogic talk tends to be monologic and teacher-controlled, serving primarily to transmit information, assess recall via the IRE (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) pattern, or manage routines. This usually limits deeper intellectual engagement (Alexander, 2020), in which learners construct knowledge rather than receiving it passively.

This chapter expands on *Chapter 8*, which discusses engagement and motivation, and *Chapter 9*, which covers mutual respect. It concentrates on those palette practices where dialogic elements appeared in the Nepali context. Therefore, I include only those teachers whose practices reflected elements of dialogic teaching. Although these dialogic moments were embedded within everyday practices, they were not widespread. Rather, they illustrate how dialogue surfaced contextually across classrooms. Although 'assessment' is part of the

palette of practices discussed in earlier chapters, assessment did not produce dialogic interactions in my data. As such, it is not treated as a palette practice in this chapter.

National policies, including the national curriculum, emphasise engagement as discussed earlier, but they do not provide explicit guidance on using dialogue as a pedagogical approach. Instead, they assume learners are actively engaged in learning. This implies that dialogue can function as one way to move away from passive and transmissive teaching–learning experiences (MoEST, 2022, p.6).

1. Palette practice: Use of lecturing and reading the chapter together

In this subsection, I show how dialogic elements surfaced within this palette practice, even though these dialogic moments did not originate from the palette itself. As discussed in *Chapter 8* on motivation and engagement, mathematics teachers were observed using a significant amount of 'classroom talk' to engage in the teaching-learning processes during lessons at the three schools. After explaining a mathematical question, students would be asked to "try and explain what they understood to their friend sitting next to them" (in grade three) (Aarati, T, Shree Maya, CO). Similarly, another approach was asking students to "solve a problem from the book and explain how they did so" (Sneha, T, Shree Maya), or "find a friend who did not solve the question correctly and identify where they went wrong and explain to them" (Rabi, T, Shree Saraswati). These tasks led learners to use talk to clarify concepts with peers, creating openings for dialogic elements within a palette that was otherwise monologic. In these episodes, dialogic engagement occurred primarily between students, whereas teacher turns served as prompts rather than as extended dialogic exchanges.

> ***Observation Notes: 30/05/2024-Rabi-Maths-Grade Three (T, Shree Saraswati, CO)***
> *Children with their shoes off sit in a communal space that they've created by bringing in an extra table and covering it with a bedsheet. They are excited for class.*
> *Rabi: Alright, today, we will continue measuring things around us. Remember that you all are to work together. Measure as many things as you want. I want a variety of measurements, not just the desk and the bench.*

Student One: Yes, we understand.
Rabi: You know how to measure?
Students (in unison): Yes, you told us yesterday.
Rabi: Just remind me, pointing at student two, show me how to measure this desk.
Student two gets the measuring tape; as they are about to start measuring, student three says:
Remember, we have to start from one edge to another.
Student one: Otherwise, the measurement is not always accurate.
Students three and one in unison: We also have to ensure we start from zero.
Student two: I understand, but why can we not start from one when we measure? And why do we have to start from zero?
Student Three: If you measure from one, you will leave out the beginning.
Student one: Why does that matter?
Student four (smiling), it's like if I measured your height but left out your head. So technically, I would only be measuring part of you, not your entire height.

This illustrates how, through conversations with one another, the students clarified and engaged further on measurement techniques. The learners in this lesson spoke of how "they believed they could measure anything, all sizes and shapes, because they understand the approach" (S, Shree Saraswati, CO/ CWS).

Some teachers encouraged students to engage in "conversations with each other" (CO, Shree Maya, Shree Siddhartha), particularly in lessons for social studies. The teachers who encouraged students to converse with each other often asked reflective questions such as "why do you think people drink alcohol?" (Sneha, T, Shree Maya, CO), to which children would share their opinions such as "bad company", "addiction", "frustration" (Grade four, CO, Shree Maya). This then led to other questions, and children had to work in groups to "find solutions". Here, Sneha (T, Shree Maya) and the entire class exchanged their thoughts on the topic, and this happened together as a unit. During this lesson, the children shared that "it was easier for them to write the

answers for the exercises when they could talk about it with each other and with the teacher, Sneha" (S, Shree Maya, AWS).

June (T, Shree Maya, I) shared how she was unaware of specific pedagogical approaches or techniques. However, based on her thirty years of teaching experience, she felt that when children actively converse in class and engage with the material, their learning improves. In her words, "when children engage in conversations around a topic, they can consolidate knowledge and understand it better" (June, Shree Maya, I). These illustrate how dialogic elements emerged without the policies envisioning it.

Peer-learning: Dialogue emerging within (and beyond) lecturing and reading the chapter together

This subsection examines how peer-led dialogue surfaced inside and beyond the lecturing/reading routine, illustrating how learner-initiated co-construction took place. In the context of the palette practice of lecturing and reading the chapter together, it was observed that the essence of dialogue in learning was evident among the students. The learners actively participated in discussions and conversations during these teachers' lessons. This was common in five of the teachers' lessons across the schools (June, Rashmee and Sneha in Shree Maya, Samita in Shree Siddhartha, and Richa in Shree Saraswati). These teachers often employed this method to better explain and reinforce concepts. These lessons took place typically after the teacher had explained the concepts and students had engaged with some of the written exercises. However, this was not a consistent practice. It was a regular part of instruction, but was not essential to the teaching and learning processes. In these lessons, students were observed explaining concepts to one another as they discussed the topic. These lessons and the emphasis on talk were unique.

Sneha (T, Shree Maya) frequently mentioned how "students were able to express better their ideas on topics in social studies and health when they had a chance to talk about the topics" (CO/I). Observation notes also indicate that in Sneha's lessons in grades three and four, students appeared to speak more freely about their ideas as they engaged and reflected on what was being taught. In other lessons (where dialogue was not evident), when a teacher became angry with students for not understanding a concept, they would ask a peer to explain it,

thereby keeping the process teacher-controlled and monologic as the ideas were transmitted (Alexander, 2000).

The other common phenomenon, particularly in Shree Siddhartha, in grades five upwards, was that when teachers failed to come to class, students initiated peer-led discussions on previously taught or scheduled topics. Often, the students who everyone deemed as being "the most knowledgeable" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS) would explain concepts and ask each other to clarify questions. Students asked more questions to their peers than to the teachers. A student in grade eight shared how "Student X was better at explaining the topic than the science teacher, as he was able to break down concepts, something that the teacher did not do" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). During one of the maths lessons in grade seven, when the teacher did not come to class, students collaboratively revised a section on trigonometry. The student who was deemed as being the "best in maths, better than the teacher" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS) started explaining and other students asked questions about the justifications for using specific formulas (CO, Shree Siddhartha). "The lesson today seems to be much more interactive than with the teacher present" (Pritha FN).

My fieldnotes also suggest how students, particularly in Shree Siddhartha, valued 'knowing the knowledge' in the textbook. So, this belief may also have influenced them in engaging in peer-learning, it was also observed that students in Shree Maya would ask their peers for further clarification of topics rather than their teachers, either during lessons or after class. A grade four student in Shree Maya shared how

> *"When I ask student X, she explains things to me, multiple times. She does not get angry at me. I can even ask her questions, like why it is this way, not that way, and she and I talk about it. But with most teachers, if I were to take this long to understand and ask so many questions, I would get hit two times more than I already do." (S, Shree Maya, CWS)*

In this context, the teacher did not initiate dialogue. Rather, the teacher's absence appeared to encourage more discussion of the subject matter. Paradoxically, some learners engaged more deeply with their learning through peer conversations when the teacher was not present. This suggests that students sought to take control of their own knowledge and verbalise their understanding, a process of metacognition. Students seemed less intimidated by

peers, which encouraged them to ask more questions and engage more thoroughly with the content. This seems to be a form of dialogic learning amongst peers in a Nepali context.

These examples illustrate that dialogic practices in Nepali classrooms were not systematic but emerged as contextually driven adaptations within and beyond teacher-led instruction. While some teachers consciously created space for discussion, in some instances learners initiated it themselves in the absence of teachers. This variation reflects MS4's emphasis on enabling learner voice and agency. It also highlights how reform cycles continue to overlook how children actively use agency in their learning processes.

2. Palette practice: Use of questioning and repetition

As discussed earlier, the pedagogical practice of questioning and repetition often morphed into the practice of lecturing and reading the chapter aloud together. Here the focus is on instances where learners were required to think and respond to questions and discussions beyond the text.

There were some lessons that were observed where the questioning and repetition practice was not just transmissive but created space for a "further discussion on the topic" (Pritha, FN). This was evident in one of Samita's (T, Shree Siddhartha) grade six lessons, in which it was agreed that she would ask students questions related to the chapter being taught. The students were required to answer in their own words and then ask a friend in class a question that did not have "an obvious answer in the book" (Samita, T, Shree Siddhartha, CO). One of the students asked, "What parallels can you draw from the poem with today's society? Do you find this perspective disheartening?" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CO). Here, the use of dialogue, even though it was structured in a specific format, created space for learners to reflect more deeply on the poem, beyond the questions in the textbook.

Dialogic elements were also present in June's (T, Shree Maya) lessons. For instance, during a lesson on hydroelectricity in grade four students were required to generate questions that were not included in the exercises. They worked in pairs and were required to explain specific sections of the chapter. At the end, they were expected to summarise and synthesise the various questions they had asked each other. The students enthusiastically participated in the

lesson. A learner later told me, "in June ma'am's class, she allows us to learn together by talking with one another. It's so exciting. I wish she would teach us all subjects!" (S, Shree Maya, CWS).

Dialogic exchanges appeared sometimes when it was unplanned; for example, in a lesson in grade seven in Shree Saraswati, where the chapter they were working on was on "superstitions and bad practices in society". An excerpt of this lesson is provided here.

> ***Observation Notes: 30/05/2024-Sahara-Nepali-Grade Seven (T, Shree Saraswati, CO)***
> *Sahara: How do you stop caste-based discrimination in your community? Please refer to the text and list it for me, I will then write on the board.*
> *Student X: I believe that the things written in the book will not be effective in stopping discrimination. Everyone knows we should not practice caste-based discrimination, but everyone still does. These are just things that we write about.*
> *Student Y and Z: in unison, yes exactly.*
> *Student Z: I have to argue with my mother not to wash my water bottle because she wants me to wash it before I take it to the kitchen.*
> *Student Y: And yet we constantly talk in school about how caste-based discrimination should be stopped because a Dalit's blood and our blood is the same colour, but somehow our parents still believe in this.*
> *Student X: Yes, no matter what we write or say, discrimination happens, even in the smallest incidents, like you, ma'am, not drinking the water from the same jar that Saugat sir has touched.*
> *Sahara (a little uncomfortable): I do not discriminate. How can I discriminate when I am a teacher? I do not believe in caste. It's just that you know that when we have Saraddahs[10] that's only when I don't drink water. But not because Saugat sir has touched it, I don't drink it at all.*
> *Student X: Do you see what I mean? The discrimination will never stop, so what is the point in writing all of this?*

This excerpt shows how classroom talk unintentionally encouraged discussions about caste-based discrimination, sparking an unplanned conversation. This

[10] The death anniversary of immediate family members is performed through this religious ritual.

dialogue prompted both students and teacher to engage with the issue and critically reflect on current practices.

Peer-led dialogue and co-thinking

As in the section on lecturing and reading together, part of the dialogue that took place in lessons occurred when teachers were absent. This section examines how learner-led dialogue emerged in these moments, enabling students to reason together and engage in learning.

The dialogue and conversations involved the question answers, but it seemed that there were more discussions when the teacher was not around. This was particularly evident in Shree Siddhartha, where, at least during my fieldwork, there were a lot of empty classes as teachers did not go to teach. This was common in grades six to eight. As an illustration, I will summarise the conversation from one of the lessons (Pritha FN)(14/03/2024).

> *Two students are standing in front of the class, and the rest of those present are sitting crammed in the first rows of benches. They discussed acid, base, and salt in chemistry.*
> *Student P: I understand the difference between acid and base. I know most of the answers to the questions in the exercises. I watched a video on YouTube that discussed how acids and bases play a role in digesting food. That is what I am confused about.*
> *Student T: So, let's see, I believe that the stomach produces hydrochloric acid*
> *Student E: And that kills harmful bacteria.*
> *Student P: Why does it kill bacteria? Wait, let me think. So the environment becomes too acidic for the bacteria to survive?*
> *Students T and E: Yes, and as we learnt, the base acts as a neutraliser and …?*
> *Student P: The pancreas releases bicarbonate, which neutralises the stomach area, making it conducive for the digestive enzymes to work.*
> *Student H: In essence, our body is this complex, intelligent chemist.*
> *Student N: I have another more difficult question.*

This excerpt illustrates dialogic learning, in which learners collaboratively reason about scientific concepts, negotiate meaning, and extend their understanding beyond rote recall. This aligns with the essence of MS4.

At Shree Saraswati, due to the small number of students in the school, it was common for them to discuss the questions among themselves before responding to the teacher. This pattern was commonly seen in grades six through eight, where teachers dedicated time to discussion. Students engaged in brainstorming potential answers or solving maths problems collaboratively, often building on each other's ideas. This was especially noticeable in some of Milan's lessons (T, Shree Saraswati) in both mathematics and social studies, as well as in Richa's (T) classes in grades seven and eight, where she covered health. Although this practice was frequent, it was not a primary teaching approach. Both Milan and Richa (T, Shree Saraswati) shared similar views, stating that they "found conversations enabled students to express themselves more clearly" (I). But this was not a "planned teaching approach" (Milan, I).

Another version of using dialogue during this practice as a method for peer learning was evident at Shree Maya. Observation notes indicate that in several instances, teachers became upset with students for not knowing the answers to questions. For example, during one of Bipana's lessons (T, Shree *Maya, CO*), a student was unable to answer a question, even after being asked repeatedly. At this point, another peer took the initiative and informed the teacher that they would discuss the answer with their friend before responding. The lesson continued with the teacher asking other students the same question, while the peer who volunteered was observed discussing the answer with the student who had struggled. The student contributed a new perspective, and the peer noted that it made sense, but advised against sharing it with the teacher, as the teacher was only seeking that particular aspect of the answer (CO, Shree Maya). Such a phenomenon was also observed in some of Subhas's (T, Shree Maya) and Aasma's (T, Shree Maya) lessons.

> *"I can't help but think that when the learners speak to each other, and work on the answers, it not only diffuses this uneasy feeling that I feel when someone is unable to answer a question (maybe it's just me feeling uneasy), but it actually helps the child who is struggling to conceptualise and articulate their thoughts." (Pritha, FN)*

One of the students in grade four shared how "talking to friends about topics being taught in class helped them feel more confident in answering the questions as these conversations made things clearer than just listening and answering questions asked by Bipana ma'am" (S, Shree Maya, AWS). This was a shared thought amongst the children I collaborated with in Shree Maya.

These instances highlight how classroom talk among peers created dialogic spaces that enabled learners to negotiate meaning and extend understanding beyond rote recall, reflecting the essence of MS4.

3. Palette practice: Assigning homework

In this section, I will draw upon two specific illustrations of how dialogue and peer learning were used to enhance homework practices, thereby enabling learner voice and agency.

> ***Pritha Field Notes, 06/01/2024-Shree Maya***
> *Sneha and June (Ts, Shree Maya) decided that June (T) would stay after school to help three students who were lagging behind (Shree Maya, FN). June sat the students down and explained that they were instructed to simply talk to each other without being asked questions or being evaluated on their knowledge of the topic or their homework discussions. After some time, they were all to do their homework together. The students agreed, and initially, they discussed general topics. An excerpt of this interaction is provided below.*
>
> *Student X: I am on the verge of failing in school. I make all teachers angry, except you and Sneha, ma'am. I usually don't have time to study because my mother comes late from work, and I have to cook and look after my six-month-old sibling.*
> *June: Yes, I know. What is the most difficult subject?*
> *Student X: Maths. I don't know anything, especially when it's written in words. I don't understand at all.*
> *June: Alright, Student Y, read this for me. Pointing at the exercise that was assigned as homework.*

Student Y reads the sentence: There were ten apples in the basket, and Mina ate two, Lila ate four, and Suman ate one. How many apples remain?
Student X: This is too difficult. It's fine, miss. I will get hit tomorrow. It doesn't matter.
June: Wait. Student W and Y let's do this together. How many apples are there?
All students in unison: 10. Who is going to write it?
Students: All of us.
June: How many apples did Mina eat?
Students in unison: 2.
June: How many did Suman eat?
Students: One
June: Well done
Student X: And Lila ate four.
June: Yes, so now, how many apples have been eaten? Just count
Students: five no, (in their individual pace), Mina ate two, Suman ate one, that is three, and Lila ate four, that is seven.
June: So?
Seven apples were eaten.
June: What does that mean?
Students in unison: Out of ten apples, seven were eaten, so there were three left?
June: Are you sure?
Students: Yes, yes, ten minus seven is three. One of them counts out loud on their fingers and shows their hand as proof.
After the students left, June said:
Do you see what I meant earlier? Talking helps these children conceptualise things. Student X convinces himself that he's not good, but if you give him the space to work through his thoughts by allowing him to vocalise them, he manages to find a solution. I wish other teachers did things a little differently.

This interaction also reflects a relational dimension, culturally embedded in the classroom context, where the student felt safe and was given space to articulate and work through his thoughts.

Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha) used "peer correcting" as an approach to provide feedback on the assignments she set. Groups of students were invited to meet with her during lunchtime (from grades six to eight, in groups of approximately fifteen students). Here, they sat in a circle, and for each question, the students discussed all the points relevant to each topic.

This method somewhat encouraged collaborative participation through peer feedback, rather than limiting interaction to teacher-led evaluation. It illustrates how teacher beliefs created dialogic spaces. This was also a coping strategy to manage the high student population. Learners exercised agency through active participation and joint decision-making. "It feels like students are creating a marking scheme" (Pritha FN). On this basis, the students would review their assignments with the teacher. Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha, I) explained how "this approach ensured that the students not only wrote the answers but were able to evaluate it." A student in grade six remarked, "Marking our assignments by discussing makes it feel like revision because I am constantly also thinking, I can write this in a better way next time" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). This example illustrates how dialogic spaces were created within homework practices, enabling learners to exercise agency and to reflect on and engage with what they were learning.

Summary

This chapter differs from the previous Chapters *8* and *9* that presented the palette of practices on a spectrum. Here, the sole focus is on presenting incidents that can be considered part of 'dialogue' or dialogic teaching rather than the entire spectrum. Although these dialogic moments were embedded within everyday palette practices, they were not widespread.

The chapter showcases how dialogue may be practised in the Nepali context. In *Chapter 12*, I will make a case for how some teachers employed a contextual version of dialogic teaching. However, these teachers engaged in this practice because they felt it assisted in the learning process, rather than as a conscious decision to use such an approach. Furthermore, as in the previous chapters, this practice did not exist in isolation; it was often integrated into a broader array of classroom practices and approaches.

An equally important aspect considered in this chapter is peer learning, and how students are supported in the teaching-learning process, creating spaces for "independent learning" and discussing "questions that were not asked to the teachers" among peers which furthered their learning and engagement. In doing so, they offer more than pedagogical variation. They gesture toward disrupting the recurring karmic cycle of reform, where ambitious policies repeatedly loop back into partial implementation. Dialogic learning, grounded in local cultural contexts, might serve as a culturally meaningful way to break this cycle.

Chapter 11. Findings: Part IV

Setting the scene

In the previous three chapters, I examined the palette of practices (Barrett, 2007) that shaped everyday pedagogical approaches. These were analysed using three of Schweisfurth's (2013) Minimum Standards (MS1, 2, 4) as organising principles to unpack practices, beliefs, and experiences across the three schools. Methodologically, I employed horizontal comparisons and situated these within policy mandates through vertical comparison (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b).

This chapter shifts the focus from classroom-level practices, experiences, and beliefs — primarily centred on teachers' actions — to broader structural factors of curriculum, assessment, and policy that shape pedagogical implementation. These practices are influenced by wider structural elements, including curriculum design, assessment regimes, policy expectations, and cultural logics, which determine what is feasible in classrooms. The structures are examined through *MS6 (curriculum focused on skills, attitude and content) and MS7 (assessment focused on skills rather than content)*. The analysis emphasises the link between pedagogy and onto-cultural perspectives (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017), illustrating how systemic expectations intersect and influence classroom experiences (pedagogical nexus) (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). It highlights how these practices are not merely individual teaching choices but are systemically embedded pedagogical enactments.

The chapter is structured into two sections. The first examines through MS6 the National Curriculum as a policy, comparing it with teachers' experiences and perceptions. The Nepali textbooks for grades one, five and eight are used as reference points in this discussion. The analysis is framed within the concept of the karmic cycle of policy implementation, highlighting the reciprocal influence between systemic design and classroom practice. This is because it is crucial to recognise that curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are interconnected and actively influence each other (Alexander, 2000; Barrett and Moore, 2015; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). For instance, the interpretation of curriculum goals and assessment regimes shapes pedagogical decisions, which in turn affect how these structures are enacted in the classroom.

The second section of the chapter explores assessment practices through MS7, focusing on the tension between summative and formative approaches. This analysis examines how assessment regimes impact teaching strategies and student motivation.

The curriculum and textbook nexus

Contextualising the National Curriculum

The National Curriculum (MoEST, CDC, 2019) sets out the government's vision for basic education (grades 1–8), aiming to shift toward learner-centred approaches. Its goal is to foster holistic development and responsible citizenship. The curriculum employs a competency-based model, emphasising the application of practical knowledge and active involvement. Competencies are structured progressively across grade levels, encompassing cognitive skills (language, mathematics, science), socio-emotional qualities (democratic values, global citizenship), life skills, and cultural growth (MoEST, CDC, 2019). While aligned with LCE principles, the curriculum remains quite prescriptive and results-oriented, breaking down broad competencies into detailed, rigid learning outcomes. This design limits teacher and student agency and supports content-focused instruction, creating a gap between policy intentions and classroom practice.

While the curriculum sets out broad competency goals, the textbook serves as a practical guide for teachers, showing how policy ideals are put into practice or fall short in classrooms. Teachers' understanding and application of the National Curriculum are shaped by their daily teaching experiences.

Understanding whether and how the National Curriculum is engaged with in practice is crucial, as its intended role is to guide pedagogy and classroom processes. However, observations revealed a striking disconnect: across the three schools, the National Curriculum, though widely acknowledged, was rarely used. A physical copy of the document for basic education (grades one to eight) was available in Shree Maya and Shree Siddhartha, but it was either stored away in the principal's desk or placed on a crowded shelf. Shree Saraswati did not have a copy; they had "ordered one which had not arrived yet" (Sahara, T, Shree Saraswati, I).

The impracticalities of the National Curriculum were often expressed by the teachers. It was deemed as being "too bulky, no one uses it" (June, T, Shree Maya, I) or "how complicated and inconvenient the document was" (Nafisa, T, Shree Siddhartha, I) and how the policy "does not match the reality that we have to teach under" (Milan, T, Shree Saraswati, I). The curriculum was not a central feature of the teaching and learning processes and was not widely used. Instead, the teachers across the three schools used the textbook as their primary resource and for lesson structuring (CO).

Teachers on permanent contracts were more aware of the directives in the National Curriculum than those with temporary agreements. Milan (T, Shree Saraswati, I) spoke of how

> *"detailed the curriculum was, and that it could, in principle, be more useful than the textbook because learning objectives and skills were listed. However, the language used is very technical, and so the textbooks are easier to use as teaching material."*

Teachers on permanent contracts were more well-versed in the National Curriculum because it was a required text for the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC) exams. So, rather than the policy being used as a guide for their classroom practices, the policy acted as study material. The actual functionality of the curriculum was questionable. Subhas, (T, Shree Maya, I) expressed that he was well versed with the content of the previous curriculum, "However, that curriculum has now been substituted with a new one, which I don't have to learn, since my teaching relies on the book; it is unrelated to the curriculum" (Subhas, T, Shree Maya, I).

The other reason teachers excluded it from their daily practice was that they believed it was incompatible with the lived realities of their classrooms. Shankhar (T, Shree Siddhartha, I/FN) and Milan (T, Shree Saraswati, I) detailed the components of the new curriculum, recalling many aspects from memory, having just passed the TSC exam. Milan shared that, despite its thoroughness, the curriculum would never work because it did not reflect the lived realities of teachers and students in the classroom. Other teachers at Shree Siddhartha shared this sentiment.

However, when I asked for specifics on the incongruences they noticed, they seemed hesitant to elaborate. They expressed that the curriculum was not designed with them, the teachers, or Nepali children in mind (Pritha, FN). June (T, Shree Maya, I) reflected on her experience reviewing the National Curriculum, describing it as overly "technical", which left her with little room to improvise and connect with her learners. Consequently, she declared, "I refuse to use it because it will further isolate my already struggling children" (June, T, Shree Maya, I). Meanwhile, teachers including Sneha (T, Shree Maya) and Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha), who were on temporary contracts, expressed in interviews how they

> *"taught intuitively and based on students' reactions and interactions, using the book as a basis. The curriculum is for teachers who are intelligent and capable and have passed the TSC exams. I don't understand anything written in it. Teachers like us are nobodies, and the document was never designed for us. I teach the best way I know how; that is all." (Samita, Shree Siddhartha, FN)*

These illustrations highlight that the curriculum was deemed inaccessible for various reasons, which also served as justification for its non-use in teaching and learning.

When asked about the curriculum, children across the three schools stated that they were unaware of it or what it was, as they had never physically seen it or seen it being used. "The teachers who teach us always use the textbook and just follow it" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). When asked about learning objectives or if they were aware of them, "Sometimes, June Ma'am tells us that we will be able to do certain things at the end of the lesson, but she's the only one who does it (S, grades three, four, Shree Maya, AWS).

Another important aspect emerging from this discussion is the tension between policy rhetoric and subject-level prescriptions. While the National Curriculum emphasises holistic development and learner-centred principles, the Nepali subject curriculum introduces rigid, sequential instruction that contradicts competency-based goals. The detailed subject curriculum also reflects how the policymakers conceptualise knowledge and skills (see *Chapter 2* for details). This seems to be almost a shared norm between the policymakers and the teachers of what is knowledge. Blaming teachers for resisting change is difficult to justify;

rather, it is important to understand this common view of how knowledge and skills are perceived.

This section illustrates a deep disconnect between policy aspirations and classroom realities: not only was the curriculum dismissed by teachers, but learners had no meaningful connection with it. Its existence made no difference to their learning experiences, undermining the SESP (2021/2022-2031/32) reform, which further seeks to address the implementation gap and actualise LCE in practice.

The centrality of the textbook and its alignment with the National Curriculum

Building on the discussion of the National Curriculum, this section examines how textbooks function as the practical anchor for teachers, revealing the disconnect between policy ideals and classroom realities. While the National Curriculum promotes holistic development and competency-based learning (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b), textbooks remain highly structured and prescriptive, mirroring the detailed subject curriculum. This alignment reinforces a content-driven approach, leaving little space for autonomy or co-construction of knowledge for both teachers and learners. But it also reflects embedded cultural logics and structural influences that have worked together to produce this alignment.

The textbooks for grades one, five, and eight for the Nepali subject illustrate this tension:

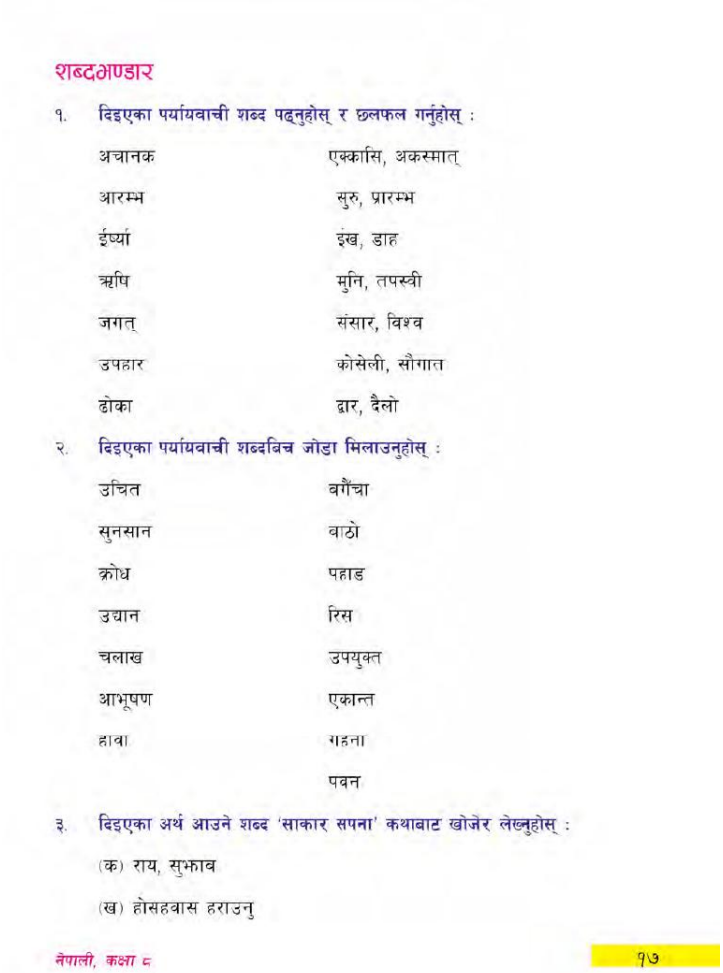
- Grade one Nepali language learning is introduced through foundational literacy activities that rely on repetitive exercises and visual cues. This is illustrated through a textbook page presenting early-grade tasks focused on tracing letter forms, recognising basic vocabulary, and completing simple comprehension and counting activities, where meaning is scaffolded through repetition, pictorial supports, and structured guidance (see *Figure 18*).

Figure 18: Example of grade one Nepali textbook



- Grade five introduces comprehension and vocabulary-building tasks but still frames imagination and role-play within rigid structures.
- Grade eight incorporates advanced grammar and literary forms alongside structured exercises for interpretation and argumentative writing. While projects on nationalism and service aim to foster critical thinking, they occur within tightly drawn boundaries. This is illustrated through a textbook page that includes activities such as identifying synonymous words, completing structured language exercises, and writing in a tightly structured exercise(see *Figure 19*).

Figure 19: Example of grade eight Nepali textbook



शब्दभण्डार

१. दिइएका पर्यायवाची शब्द पढ्नुहोस् र छलफल गर्नुहोस् :

अचानक	एक्कासि, अकस्मात्
आरम्भ	सुरु, प्रारम्भ
ईर्ष्या	इख, डाह
ऋषि	मुनि, तपस्वी
जगत्	संसार, विश्व
उपहार	कोसेली, सौगात
ढोका	द्वार, दैलो

२. दिइएका पर्यायवाची शब्दबिच जोडा मिलाउनुहोस् :

उचित	बगैंचा
सुनसान	बाठो
क्रोध	पहाड
उद्यान	रिस
चलाख	उपयुक्त
आभूषण	एकान्त
हावा	गहना
	पवन

३. दिइएका अर्थ आउने शब्द 'साकार सपना' कथाबाट खोजेर लेख्नुहोस् :

(क) राय, सुझाव

(ख) होसहवास हराउनु

नेपाली, कक्षा ८ १७

Collectively, these textbooks align with subject-level goals but limit opportunities for learner autonomy and dialogic engagement, reinforcing how a 'structure' (textbook) reaffirms existing teaching practices.

Even though national policies emphasise learner-centred and individually tailored approaches (CDC, 2019), observations revealed that most teachers prioritised content mastery and accuracy of answers as discussed in the earlier Findings chapters. They omitted activities requiring creativity or independent thinking. Bipana (T, Shree Maya, CO) remarked during grade two Nepali lessons that "sections making students draw and colour flowers just wasted everyone's time." Aasma (T, Shree Maya, I) agreed, explaining that "students were already behind in basic literacy and numeracy, and such activities distracted them from being serious." These teachers often instructed students to complete creative tasks only at home when bored.

Similarly, in Shree Siddhartha and Shree Saraswati, when exercises required students to 'create something,' teachers gave specific instructions, limiting autonomy. For example, during a grade one lesson, Rabi (T, Shree Saraswati, CO) told students to draw their house but rejected a child's idea of a round house, insisting, "That doesn't exist," and asked them to copy his drawing from the board. Such practices illustrate how textbook provisions for creativity were overridden by teacher interpretations of what constituted 'real learning', shaped by exam-driven accountability (Jyoti, T, Shree Saraswati, I). This pattern highlights the importance of recognising that the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'learning' are deeply embedded in both cultural (personal beliefs about what constitutes serious learning) and structural (how high-stakes examinations are used for career progression, such as in the civil service or for securing a permanent teaching position) dimensions.

While many teachers omitted creative tasks in textbooks in order to prioritise content mastery, others adapted these activities to encourage independent thinking, illustrating how agency and contextual interpretation shape pedagogical choices. Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha, CO) asked grade seven learners to write original stories, emphasising that "students must think for themselves." Sneha (T, Shree Maya) instructed grade four students to imagine a perfect world during a discussion on rights and equality. One student reflected, "Hopefully, when we become older, we can work towards this world. Even if we can make it one-tenth of what we have discussed, I would die with my heart full" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CO). These practices aligned with curriculum objectives, though teachers admitted they were unaware of this, describing the curriculum as "too complex" (Sneha, Shree Maya, I). These examples demonstrate that even within rigid curricular structures, teacher agency can create spaces for creativity and learner voice, reinforcing the argument that pedagogical practices are negotiated within cultural and systemic logics rather than dictated by policy prescriptions.

These practices cannot be reduced to a simplistic gap between policy and practice. Instead, they exemplify how conceptions of 'knowledge' and 'learning' are deeply embedded and negotiated in cultural and systemic logics, shaping what teachers and learners perceive as meaningful learning. This contextual embeddedness highlights how pedagogical choices are not dictated by policy

prescriptions. Rather, they are negotiated within everyday realities, mediated by teacher beliefs, learner agency, and structural dynamics.

The assessment nexus

This reliance on textbooks intersects with assessment practices. When systemic pressures and beliefs favour content-focused learning, they sustain the ongoing karmic cycles of unsuccessful education reforms as well as current teaching and learning practices.

Building on the discussion of curriculum as a structural influence, this section shifts to the assessment nexus, another crucial dimension shaping pedagogical practices (Alexander, 2000). Although policy rhetoric presents assessment as a tool for continuous growth and learner-centred development, classroom realities tell a different story.

To do this, I will apply MS7 (Schweisfurth, 2013), which states that assessments should *"test skills and allow for individual differences, rather than being purely content-driven or based only on rote learning"* (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 146). I will use it as an organising framework for how assessment policies and reforms are enacted in practice. This analysis probes how policy expectations interact with teacher beliefs and learner agency, revealing the cultural and structural realities and contexts that determine what learning is.

Contextualising policy expectation

The National Curriculum emphasises the importance of continuous assessment to track students' growth (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). For grades one to three, it directs teachers to maintain individual portfolios and consistently monitor progress, focusing on development rather than mere recall of content (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). Teachers are required to provide continuous feedback and tailor lessons to address individual challenges (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b), rating performance on a progressive achievement scale: weak, basic, proficient, advanced (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). Detailed formats for subject-specific assessments accompany these directives, yet much like the Nepali subject curriculum, they remain rooted in subsets of skills such as 'word recall' (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). While this ensures consistency, it also limits autonomy and predetermines what constitutes learning.

With regard to grades four to eight, the emphasis on continuous assessment persists, reiterating the need to address individual learning needs and optimise growth (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). However, this is coupled with external end-of-year exams that carry 50% weightage, creating tension between formative ideals and summative priorities (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). Internal assessments are further broken down into specific criteria (MoEST, CDC, 2019, p. 10), reinforcing systemic pressures that privilege measurable outputs over process-oriented learning, as described in *Table 29*.

Table 29: Internal assessment criteria (MoEST, CDC, 2019, p.11)

Basis of Assessment	**Weightage**
Active participation and engagement during the teaching and learning processes	4 %
Creative work, project work, and other innovative activities and generation of work	36%
Terminal exams	10%
Total	**50%**

Together these directives aim to ensure consistency, while simultaneously constraining autonomy. The fact that fifty per cent of the weightage comes from external exams undermines the very purpose of continuous assessment, reducing it to a symbolic exercise. This tension mirrors the disjuncture highlighted earlier within the National Curriculum with its overall aspirations and the Nepali subject curriculum (see *Chapter 2*).

The perceived importance of assessments

Assessment outcomes emerged as a key indicator of school success. There was a common belief among teachers across the three schools that "the effectiveness of the school and the quality of the teachers was based on how well students did in the end-of-year exams, terminal exams in general" (Rashmee, T, Shree Maya, I). In fact, it was observed that, based on conversations between teachers, "model schools were selected either by the national government in coordination with other bodies based on how well students performed in the end-of-year exams, specifically grades eight and ten" (Subhas, Shree Maya, I).

In line with this, the policy states that each electoral district (240) will have one model school (MoE, 2016). However, the primary focus remains on improving student performance in science, mathematics, and English (MoE, 2016). This is

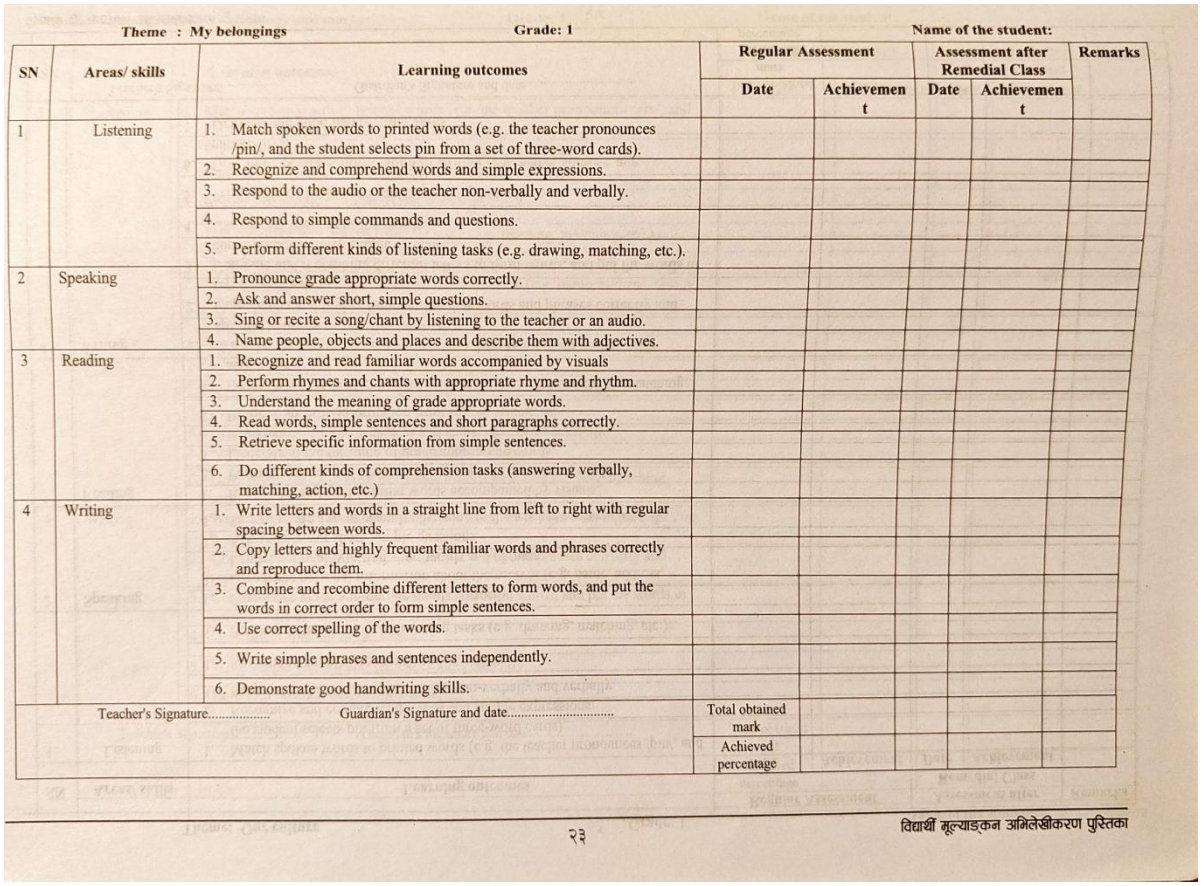
also something that some of the donors including the World Bank have reinforced (with the new mentoring programme and others).

Despite directives to replace summative assessments with a Continuous Assessment System (CAS), practices remain predominantly focused on written exams (MoEST, 2022). This systemic prioritisation of measurable outputs reflects the pedagogical nexus, where structural pressures perpetuate classroom priorities. The following discussion focuses on data generated in Shree Maya and Shree Siddhartha, as evaluations were not conducted in Shree Saraswati during the fieldwork.

The use of Continuous Assessment System (CAS)

It was observed that CAS was used symbolically, as the practices did not always align with the intended responses. In both schools, teachers were observed completing the CAS template. For example, in grade 1, under the theme 'Our Environment' (see *Figure 20*) listening skills include matching spoken words to printed words (e.g., the teacher pronounces the word "pin" and the student finds the printed word "pin"). For speaking, 'pronounce grade-appropriate word correctly' is an assessment criterion. For reading, 'put sounds together to read sentences and recognise familiar words with visuals', and for writing, 'write letters and words in a straight line from left to right with regular spacing between words'. At the bottom of the page, the total marks obtained and the percentage are shown. Teachers either rated children on a scale or completed detailed forms for individual students in grades one to three, rather than continuously.

Figure 20: A template for a grade one CAS report on 'Our Environment'



Theme : My belongings Grade: 1 Name of the student:

SN	Areas/ skills	Learning outcomes	Regular Assessment		Assessment after Remedial Class		Remarks
			Date	Achievement	Date	Achievement	
1	Listening	1. Match spoken words to printed words (e.g. the teacher pronounces /pin/, and the student selects pin from a set of three-word cards).					
		2. Recognize and comprehend words and simple expressions.					
		3. Respond to the audio or the teacher non-verbally and verbally.					
		4. Respond to simple commands and questions.					
		5. Perform different kinds of listening tasks (e.g. drawing, matching, etc.).					
2	Speaking	1. Pronounce grade appropriate words correctly.					
		2. Ask and answer short, simple questions.					
		3. Sing or recite a song/chant by listening to the teacher or an audio.					
		4. Name people, objects and places and describe them with adjectives.					
3	Reading	1. Recognize and read familiar words accompanied by visuals					
		2. Perform rhymes and chants with appropriate rhyme and rhythm.					
		3. Understand the meaning of grade appropriate words.					
		4. Read words, simple sentences and short paragraphs correctly.					
		5. Retrieve specific information from simple sentences.					
		6. Do different kinds of comprehension tasks (answering verbally, matching, action, etc.)					
4	Writing	1. Write letters and words in a straight line from left to right with regular spacing between words.					
		2. Copy letters and highly frequent familiar words and phrases correctly and reproduce them.					
		3. Combine and recombine different letters to form words, and put the words in correct order to form simple sentences.					
		4. Use correct spelling of the words.					
		5. Write simple phrases and sentences independently.					
		6. Demonstrate good handwriting skills.					
Teacher's Signature..... Guardian's Signature and date.....			Total obtained mark				
			Achieved percentage				

२३ विद्यार्थी मूल्याङ्कन अभिलेखीकरण पुस्तिका

During terminal exams for higher grades, grade one to three teachers were observed completing CAS reports in bulk instead of updating them gradually throughout the term. These forms were frequently completed in a single session to meet local authority deadlines, thereby reducing CAS to a compliance task rather than a meaningful tool for monitoring student development. In Shree Saraswati, teachers shared how they stopped completing CAS portfolios because local authorities never collected them (Sahara, T, Shree Maya, I). These practices illustrate how CAS functioned symbolically, serving bureaucratic requirements rather than pedagogical purposes, contradicting its intended role of supporting continuous feedback and individualised learning (MoEST, CDC, 2019).

At Shree Maya, CAS was observed to be used as a mechanism for controlling student behaviour rather than for tracking learning progress. For example, in grade one, when students did not remain still after repeated requests, Aasma (T) threatened to "give everyone zeros while filling out the CAS form if they did not sit still" (Shree Maya, CO). During observations, Aasma (T) and Bipana (T)

were seen completing CAS forms together, discussing how "X student was well-behaved, so she should receive higher marks than Y student, who was too disruptive in class" (Pritha FN). Aasma explained that "it was important for these young children to receive marks based on their behaviour, as ability could not be determined so early" (Aasma, T, Shree Maya, I). These practices illustrate how CAS grades were used as positive or negative reinforcement to regulate behaviour, reflecting teacher beliefs that young children were not fully capable of meeting expected standards.

Such interpretations contradict policy directives that position CAS as a formative tool for monitoring growth and tailoring support (MoEST, CDC, 2019). When learners were asked about assessments, many stated they "were given marks based on how well they could do in exams" (S, Shree Maya, CWS), while others in grades three and four repeatedly shared how "they never got good marks in certain subjects because the teachers did not like them" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). One student added, "If I was told that there were specific answers that were incorrect, I would believe the teacher, but often times, I never get to see the answer papers or what I have done wrong" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). These accounts highlight how assessment practices were perceived as punitive rather than supportive of children's learning. It also exemplifies how a well-intended policy reform such as CAS was reinterpreted by teachers to use it as a control mechanism, contradicting its core purpose.

Teachers Aarati, June, Rashmee, and Sneha (Shree Maya) found maintaining individual student portfolios for CAS evaluation challenging due to workload demands. They described the process as "too tedious and repetitive" (Aarati, T, Shree Maya, FN). To address this, they adopted a pragmatic approach: selecting four assignments per year in which students excelled and using them for CAS records. Students were informed in advance that these assignments would count toward CAS. Aarati (T, Shree Maya, I) explained that she "kept track of students' progress", which enabled her to design more challenging tasks across grades. Ultimately, the emphasis shifted to "showing students could do well in school" (June, T, Shree Maya, I). This illustrates how CAS portfolios were streamlined rather than continuous.

However, whether these assignments demonstrated growth over time remained unclear. Learners reported that they knew "exactly what they needed to do, or

what they did well" in these tasks (S, Shree Maya, grades three and four, CWS/AWS) but did not speak about progress. This adaptation illustrates how CAS, intended as a formative tool for continuous assessment, was reinterpreted as a mechanism for efficiency and compliance rather than as a means of developmental feedback. Here, it is essential to consider why the assessment was conducted, as this appears to influence its administration. There were also practical structures that hindered the practice of CAS. These constraints shaped how CAS functioned in practice.

At Shree Siddhartha, CAS evaluations for grades one to three were observed to rely primarily on exam scores rather than continuous monitoring. Nafisa (T, Shree Siddhartha, I) explained that she found CAS "too complex with all the subdivisions", adding that "there was no difference between assessing students through exams and CAS, as both required them to rate the students." Other teachers echoed this view, describing the "breakdown of every single entity" as "not useful in reflecting students' ability" (Shankhar, T, Shree Siddhartha, I).

Teachers perceived "exams were the most accurate indicator of student ability" (Omkar, T, Shree Siddhartha, I). Together, these interpretations illustrate a lack of 'buy-in' to CAS as a formative assessment tool, reducing it to a compliance exercise rather than a mechanism for tracking growth. This reinforces the earlier argument that CAS, despite its well-intended design, was reinterpreted by teachers as a control mechanism, contradicting its core assumptions . Similarly, learners shared this exam-centric view, stating that scores were the most "important aspect of coming to school" because they determined future success: "It would allow us to become successful people in the future" (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS).

The importance of written exams

As a recurring theme, there was a shared value and importance placed on written examinations amongst the majority of the participant teachers. This was because it was "the simplest and most efficient form of assessment" (Omkar, T, Shree Siddhartha, I). Exams were able to generate "concrete outputs based on the written quality of the answers, not vague criteria such as measuring student growth" (Tenzin, T, Shree Maya I).

Following the 2015 state restructuring, terminal exam questions for grades four and above across all community schools were developed by local authorities through a task force comprising area teachers (FN). The National Curriculum states that this should be administered only at the end-of-year exams (MoEST, CDC, 2019). Teachers at both schools expressed that this practice made them appear ineffective (Subhas, T, Shree Maya). The question format led to students performing poorly because their learning was not accurately assessed by these preset questions (FN, Shree Maya, and Shree Siddhartha).

Kamal (T), Omkar (T) and Shankhar (T) believed that "this was an effort to portray teachers as scapegoats further and blame them for the poor performance of the students, and the failing education system of the country" (T, Shree Siddhartha, FN). Here, the tensions and mistrust between local authorities, communities, and teachers are evident. Teachers were unhappy about losing the autonomy to set exam papers. At the same time, there was a shared belief that exams should assess exactly what had been taught.

The administration of terminal exams

In both schools, Shree Maya and Shree Siddhartha, there was a clear distinction in how exams were conducted for grades one to three and four to eight. Children in grade three and below took their exams in their classrooms. Teachers at both schools were observed using the exams as worksheet exercises, teaching students the correct answers (Shree Siddhartha and Shree Maya, FN). Teachers did not become angry or annoyed when a student asked how to solve a particular question (FN). In fact, it was noted that teachers would approach students individually to check their answers and ask them to make corrections if needed (FN). The only requirement was that students sit quietly and complete their work. Chetana (T, Shree Siddhartha, CO) shared that "the children were too small for exams; this was just a way to get them into the habit."

Older children were randomly assigned to mixed-grade classrooms during examinations, with each room comprising students from different grades (e.g. four students from grade four, four from grade five, and so forth). In Shree Maya, two to three students shared a bench, each belonging to a different class. In contrast, at Shree Siddhartha, four students shared a bench and a desk. Each class had an invigilator to remind students not to cheat.

However, students in both schools noted that "it was common practice to go to the bathrooms and look at chits" (S, Shree Siddhartha, Shree Maya, CWS). When asked about this, teachers in both schools stated that cheating was not a "big deal"; at least that way, "the students would get higher marks" (Namrata, T, Shree Siddhartha, CO). Shankar and Kamal (T, Shree Siddhartha I) justified this practice by saying, "To think that children do not cheat is naïve. All of us have cheated at some point in our exams. At the end of the day, no one rewards a child with low marks for not cheating. The child who secures high marks, regardless of how they achieve them, moves further in life." This sentiment was echoed by Subhas (T, Shree Maya, I), who said, "The children who come here, as you have seen, have no foundation; they will never do well. But at least if they cheat, they get the marks necessary to pass. However, they achieve them, they can progress." Also, "Good marks would also reflect positively on ourselves" (Tenzin, T, Shree Maya, FN). Therefore, 'good marks' were prioritised as tangible outputs, reflecting prevailing understandings of what counted as learning. The assumption seemed to be that such outputs would lead to better opportunities. This again ties in with the belief commonly held in Nepal that school education's primary purpose is to obtain certificates, for better opportunities and economic mobility (see *Chapter 2*). It also seems to be a defence mechanism to show that they are effective teachers, as good marks are their success indicators.

The process of correcting exam papers

Teachers across both schools were bound by strict deadlines to submit marks and corrected papers, often staying after school to complete the task. At Shree Siddhartha, male teachers who taught grades six to eight corrected papers together in the staffroom, openly discussing how "incompetent" the students were and concluding that "there was no point in spending too much time correcting these papers" (Omkar,T, Shree Siddhartha, FN). Kamal (T, Shree Siddhartha) shared this sentiment: "I know exactly where students stand, so I do not need to read their full papers" (Pritha, FN).

My field notes describe how papers worth 100 marks were marked in five to six minutes, with teachers simply ticking or crossing answers and writing the total score. Rather, they were influenced by preconceived notions about students. This then gave no space for feedback on the work itself, leaving learners with no

voice in the process. This raises questions not only about fairness but also about mutual respect, as students were denied the opportunity to understand or contest their marks. It also reinforced the power differences between the children and the teachers.

In contrast, other teachers had differing approaches. For example, Samita (T, Shree Siddhartha, I) shared, "My students come and ask me why they received so few marks, so I need to be able to provide them with answers." Other teachers emphasised the "importance of ensuring they properly mark students to encourage them to work harder" (Sneha, Shree Maya, FN). Together, these practices reflect a more relational approach, where respect was negotiated through feedback and a sense of accountability.

In Shree Siddhartha, after marking, a staff meeting revealed punitive attitudes toward underperforming students. Most of the teachers at the meeting agreed that learners in grades six to eight had "underperformed because they were not serious enough" (Pritha, FN). For each subject, five names were nominated to fail deliberately: "they need to be taught a lesson in life" (Teacher X, FN). Samita (T) refused to participate, and none of her students were nominated. This random selection, based on preconceived notions, illustrates how assessment became a mechanism of control rather than a tool for learning. It also questions the value of marks and what they represent.

At Shree Maya, there was no evidence of inflating or deflating marks. Teachers including June, Rashmee, Aarati, and Sneha reviewed papers with students who had done "extremely badly" (FN/CO). Rashmee (T) reflected aloud while marking: "I don't think these exams adequately reflect students' abilities. This student has so many responsibilities. When will he have time to study? Of course, he will fail the exams" (Pritha, FN). Her comment highlights how exams measure content recall rather than skills, failing to account for learners' lived realities. Other teachers, such as Subhas and Bipana, were more critical, attributing poor performance to lack of effort and linking it to their own reputations (FN/I). These contrasting interpretations show how marking practices were shaped by individual beliefs.

Together, these findings reveal that systemic pressures (the government's emphasis on exam outputs) and teacher beliefs shaped assessment practices. CAS was implemented only symbolically. While written exams continued to be

treated as the most 'accurate' measure of ability, marking practices also revealed that teachers' interpretations influenced judgments of students' work and shaped learners' experiences of success or failure.

Summary

Taken together, these findings connect back to earlier chapters, reinforcing how engagement, respect, and dialogue are deeply entangled with structural logics. The interplay between curriculum, textbooks, and assessment demonstrates how reforms remain symbolic when they fail to account for cultural and systemic realities (Ball, 2012a). While the National Curriculum and CAS were designed to implement learner-centred practices, their implementation was shaped by entrenched beliefs, exam-driven accountability, and structural pressures that reinforce the continuation of measurable outputs over process-oriented learning. This disconnect perpetuates the karmic cycle of reform, where progressive rhetoric coexists with practices that reproduce existing norms rather than disrupt them.

Tying the Findings Chapters together

In presenting and analysing the most prevalent pedagogical practices in Nepali basic classrooms across *Chapters 8* to *11*, through the analytical lenses of MS 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7 (Schweisfurth, 2013), the palette of practices both reflected practice and the discourse that drove it.

The analysis constantly highlighted broader patterns that have emerged in how teachers understood and enacted their roles in relation to their learners, which drove the entire teaching-learning processes and how they were experienced, negotiated and shaped. These patterns appeared across engagement and motivation (*Chapter 8*), mutual respect (*Chapter 9*), dialogue (*Chapter 10*), curriculum, and assessment (*Chapter 11*), despite variation between schools and individual teachers. These patterns of practice further challenge the implicit assumption that there is a single set of Nepali pedagogical practices. Rather, they highlight how practices are embodied and embedded within individuals and within their contexts, and this was observed along a continuum.

Throughout the findings, it is evident that practices could be clustered across two broad conceptions of teachers' positioning which translated into teaching styles. One conception emphasised authority, guidance, moral responsibility,

knowledge transmission, discipline, and the teacher's responsibility to direct learning. Other practices emphasised care, emotional support, encouragement, responsiveness, trust, and responsibility for learners' wellbeing. These patterns appeared in different ways across schools and often overlapped within the same teacher's practice.

Importantly, these patterns did not emerge solely through formal analysis of classroom practices. During interviews, observations, informal conversations, and wider interactions, teachers spoke of their sense of responsibilities towards their learners. As the analysis progressed, these recurring understandings increasingly resonated with the culturally meaningful concepts of *guru* and *abhibhawak*. Both concepts were used colloquially or inferred at different points of conversations, resonating with the wider values and beliefs. These concepts do not represent fixed teacher categories. Rather, they reflected two ends of a continuum of teaching styles, with most teachers drawing on elements of both in different ways and to different degrees. The *guru-abhibhawak* framework therefore emerged as a way of making sense of the continuum of teaching styles evident across the findings. The following chapter develops these concepts further and explores their implications for understanding pedagogical practices, learner experiences, and reform implementation in the Nepali context.

Chapter 12. Discussion: Tying everything together

Having reviewed and analysed daily pedagogical practices influenced by contextual factors, this chapter now synthesises the findings from the four Findings Chapters. It contributes to answering the research questions about how teachers and learners engage in and experience teaching and learning processes in Nepali basic schools. It does so by interpreting how daily practices, rooted in teachers' and learners' contexts, are enacted within these realities. During the discussion, I draw on the karmic cycle metaphor (discussed in *Chapter 2*) to illustrate how reform efforts often cycle back, failing to break free of entrenched patterns when these realities are overlooked.

As discussed in *Preface to Findings*, the classroom 'canvas' was never blank. Material realities, structural constraints and contextual conditions formed the underlayer on which all pedagogical practices were practised. These contextual forces continued to influence how teachers interpreted learning and responsibility, providing the backdrop for the teaching conceptions examined below. These teacher conceptions exist within the contextual conditions outlined in Chapters *2* and *7*. Subsequently, these conditions form the analytic backdrop rather than a separate object.

During the course of fieldwork, including interviews, observations, and informal conversations, ideas linked to the roles of teachers as *guru* and *abhibhawak* surfaced repeatedly in participants' discussions about teachers' roles and responsibilities (these are culturally grounded references). Consequently, *guru* and *abhibhawak* emerged through iterative engagement with the data as useful concepts for understanding the different ways teachers positioned themselves in relation to learners. As discussed below, these are best understood as points along a continuum of teaching styles rather than as fixed or mutually exclusive positions.

Building on this perspective, the discussion chapter is organised around teacher conceptions, considering how teachers' positioning as *guru* (knowledge authority/wise authority) or *abhibhawak* (parental authority) interacted with learners to shape pedagogical practices. This underpins how teachers interpret policy mandates, negotiate and enact practices, and position learners within the teaching–learning process. Within this chapter, four interrelated dimensions guide the discussion:

(i) authority and care as expressed through *guru* and *abhibhawak* identities;

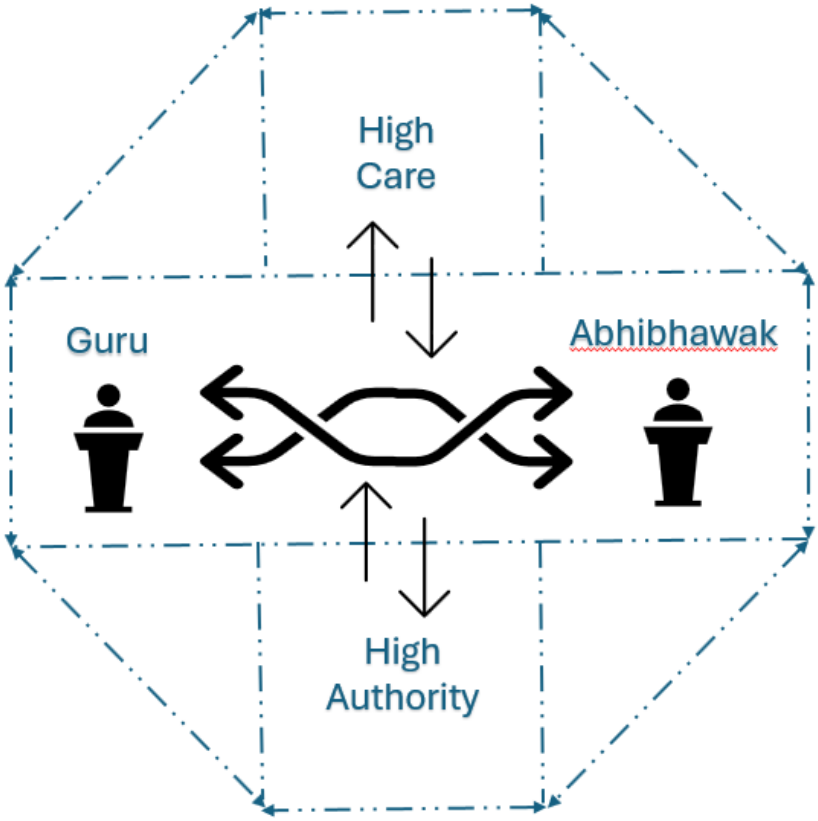
(ii) teaching styles in action and their ripple effects on learners;

(iii) relational dynamics and co-construction of knowledge (including dialogic and peer learning, woven throughout rather than treated as separate themes); and

(iv) the policy–practice gap and its implications for how teachers and learners experience classroom life and reform expectations.

Figure 21 illustrates that teacher conceptions exist along a continuum between the *guru* and the *abhibhawak* teaching styles, rather than considering them as fixed categories. This continuum underpins the discussion by showing how these identities shaped pedagogical practices in the classrooms in this study.

Figure 21: The continuum of guru and abhibhawak



The figure presents a simplified continuum showing how teachers positioned themselves between *guru* and *abhibhawak* identities. The continuum forms the foundation for the discussion, as these conceptions shaped the teaching styles enacted in classrooms. These styles structured everyday pedagogical practices, influenced learners' experiences and responses, and generated the recurring

pedagogical cycles examined in this chapter. The figure illustrates how these identities coexisted along a spectrum, with most teachers in the middle, and how they informed the manifestation of different pedagogical practices and reforms in the classrooms in this study.

Teacher conceptions shape the teaching styles enacted in classrooms. These styles structure everyday pedagogical practices, which in turn shape learners' experiences and responses, together generating the recurring pedagogical cycles examined throughout this chapter.

This interconnectedness between teacher practice and learner agency generates two linked karmic cycles: one driven by policy–practice gaps and teacher beliefs, and another shaped by teachers' relational approaches alongside learners' adaptations and negotiations within those boundaries.

This also illustrates how the transversal axis manifests, in which cultural, structural, and historical forces simultaneously shape and cut across these pedagogical cycles (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a, 2017b). These dimensions do not appear as rigid sections but resonate throughout the discussion, reflecting the complexity of classroom realities and the interconnectedness of these aspects.

A persistent gap in current research is the limited attention to children's experiences and voices regarding LCE reforms (Adamson and Brown, 2024; Sakata, 2023). Highlighting these voices is crucial because they represent the often-overlooked majority (Brown, 2025) whose present experiences will shape the future of teaching and learning in Nepal. This discussion incorporates learner perspectives to analyse how they interact with teacher practices, sometimes reinforcing them, and other times challenging traditional norms, within the ongoing cycles of reform and practice. These dynamics show how different pedagogical approaches coexisted within the same environment or across different schools, all deeply rooted in teachers' and learners' personal experiences, cultural assumptions, and structural realities (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019).

Taken together, they reveal how pedagogical practices are co-constructed, navigated, and experienced and how these dynamics perpetuate or reshape the karmic cycle of reform.

Revisiting the Nepali context

This section briefly synthesises key ideas introduced earlier (Chapters *2* and *6*) to frame how teacher conceptions, *guru* and *abhibhawak*, are culturally and structurally embedded in their contexts.

Nepal's socio-cultural landscape is shaped by Hindu and Buddhist traditions, which intersect with systemic realities, creating a heterogeneous society marked by diverse ethnicities, languages, and knowledge systems (Gellner, 2007; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008). Structural inequalities such as caste hierarchies and dominant cultural logics continue to shape access to education and classroom interactions (Parajuli and Onta, 2021).

Embedded within these realities is the concept of the karmic cycle (*karma chakra*), which frames actions and consequences as interconnected rather than linear (see *Chapter 2* for a detailed explanation). Here, the metaphor is referenced only as a lens for interpreting recurring reform patterns, not as a whole argument. These cycles are maintained by cultural norms and systemic structures rather than by technical gaps, emphasising the importance of considering the relational dynamics between teachers and learners.

The discussion draws on the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and the onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) to explore how cultural logics and systemic factors influence teaching methods (see *Chapter 4*). It also further argues the importance of incorporating children's experiences to challenge deep-rooted patterns and promote culturally relevant, learner-centred practices.

Transforming teacher-student relationships: Policy assumptions and cultural realities

Nepali education policies envision transforming classrooms by shifting teacher–student relationships from "hierarchical, formal, rigid, distanced and fear-based" to "fear-free, friendly, facilitative and learner-centred" (MoEST, 2022). This expectation rests on the emancipatory rationale for LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013). It assumes that altering relational dynamics will automatically enable learners to co-construct knowledge and challenge social hierarchies. However, this assumption is overly simplistic. It seems to treat relationships as fixed states that can be switched at will, while ignoring their cultural embeddedness and

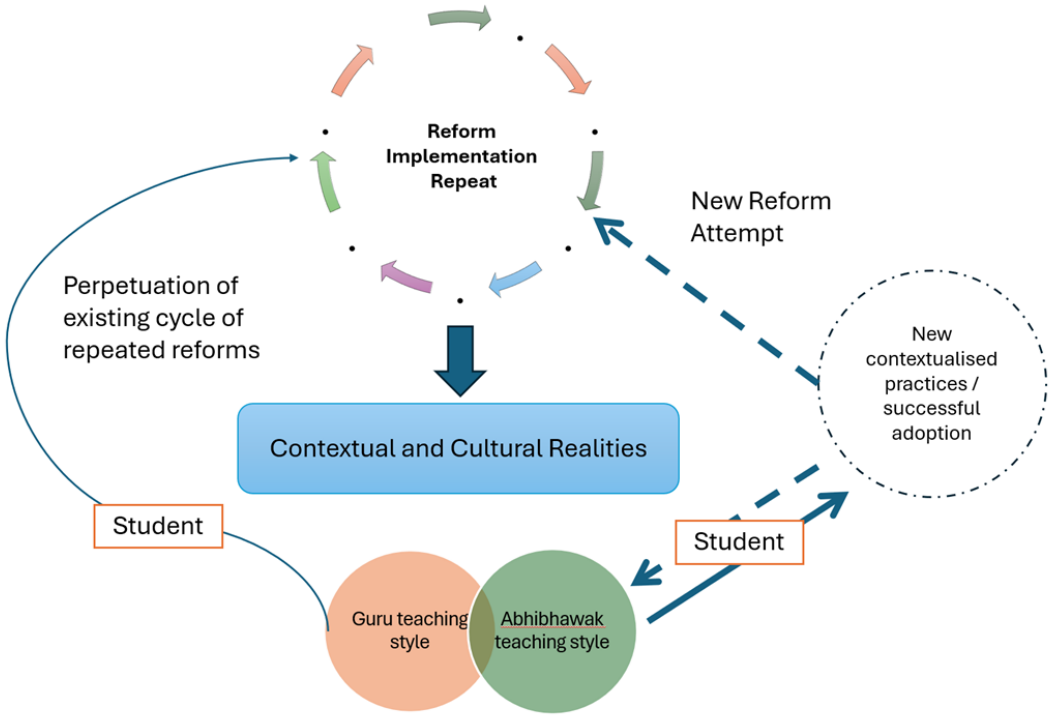
historical shaping (Alexander, 2000). Such policy visions often result in symbolic compliance rather than meaningful change (Ball, 1994), a pattern evident across low-income contexts (Schweisfurth, 2011).

Findings confirm that teacher–student relationships in Nepal are deeply rooted in respect and authority, reflecting patterns documented across different LICs (Sakata et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2011). Teachers occupy a higher moral and epistemic position (Sarangapani, 2003a, 2003c). These relationships shape norms around behaviour, learning and respect. Yet these relationships are not static. It was observed that the teacher-student dynamics were constantly negotiated by changing and evolving beliefs and perspectives about what constituted respect and learning. Both teachers and students spoke of how "times have changed". This fluidity complicates binary policy framings of 'hierarchical versus friendly' assumptions of teacher-student relationships. It highlights why reforms often fail to disrupt entrenched norms, a pattern that reflects the karmic cycle of reform introduced earlier.

These tensions represent the *prarabdha*, the present reality inherited by each new reform, where cultural assumptions and systemic expectations interact to maintain recurring patterns of partial implementation. Understanding this complexity is essential before examining how authority and care materialise in practice through the identities of *guru* and *abhibhawak*, which shape classroom dynamics and experiences.

Figure 22 presents a simplified 2D representation of a complex phenomenon in the field. At the centre, the broken circle represents the ongoing, repeated reforms being implemented. The reforms are reinterpreted through existing contextual, cultural and structural logics and realities (as shown by the arrow). The cycle produces two styles of teacher conceptions, the *guru* and the *abhibhawak* styles, which exist together on a spectrum, with the majority of teachers in the middle. The *guru* style perpetuates existing pedagogical practices that feed back into incomplete reform implementation. The *abhibhawak* style, on the other hand, leads to possible openings for new cycles of learning. This is because the children are actively involved and help create these new cycles. Both teaching styles are driven by cultural and contextual realities rather than policy directives.

Figure 22: Teaching style and effects



Authority and care: *Guru* and *abhibhawak* identities

Two culturally embedded teaching styles, *guru* and *abhibhawak*, emerged as central to understanding how authority and care are negotiated in Nepali classrooms. This duality matters because it helps explain why reforms such as LCE are not simply resisted or adopted; they are filtered through teachers' assumptions about what constitutes learning and what makes a 'good teacher' (Barrett, 2008). The findings show that these identities are not static or mutually exclusive. They actively shape pedagogical practices and influence how reforms are interpreted and enacted. Teachers enact care and authority simultaneously, which complicates assumptions about egalitarian classroom relationships embedded in LCE. This tension highlights the need to move beyond technical reform prescriptions and engage with the cultural logics that underpin everyday teaching practices.

The guru ideal

As discussed in *Chapter 2*, the concept of *guru* is deeply embedded in Nepali culture, originating from the Hindu *gurukul* system but extending beyond religion to become a shared ideal across castes and ethnicities (Baindur, 2021). This is not a fixed category and has multiple interpretations across contexts (Baindur, 2021; Lipner, 2012).

Historically, *gurus* were revered as moral exemplars and custodians of knowledge, expected to embody virtue and intellectual mastery (Sharma, 2013). Learning happened through oral transmission and memorisation of Hindu texts, intended for reflection rather than rote repetition (Baindur, 2021; Lipner, 2012). Education was exclusive, reserved for select individuals based on caste (Sharma, 2013).

Alongside intellectual authority, *gurus* were expected to care for students as if they were their own children, taking responsibility for both learning and character formation (Lipner, 2012; Sharma, 2013). Teachers and students lived together as a family, and learners had the autonomy to question or even change their *guru* if dissatisfied (Sharma, 2013). This practice has influenced classroom dynamics, influencing norms of respect, expectations of learning, and the processes through which it occurs. These practices highlight how the *guru* style of teaching is deeply embedded in the Nepali context.

The abhibhawak ideal

The concept of *abhibhawak*, literally meaning 'parent' or 'parental figure', reflects a teaching style rooted in cultural norms that position adults as moral guides and protectors of children (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021). Teachers adopting this style described themselves as 'second parents', entrusted with learners' academic progress and overall well-being. This approach highlights the centrality of relational care and emotional support in contrast to the *guru* ideal, which emphasises spiritual authority and intellectual mastery.

This style resonates with cultural expectations of respect and collective responsibility within families and communities of raising children (Bista, 1991). While this style fosters trust and relational depth, it also carries its authority where disciplinary practices are necessary. The *abhibhawak* ideal, while rooted in care, remains embedded in culturally legitimised hierarchies.

It is important to remember that these identities are not mutually exclusive. The *guru* ideal, while rooted in authority and intellectual mastery, also carries expectations of care. Likewise, the *abhibhawak* identity can exercise authority in ways that mirror *guru* traits. This dualism reflects the complexity of teacher positioning and teaching styles in Nepal's decentralised school context, where authority and care are interwoven and can at times fuel tensions (Khanal, 2011).

These intersections lay the groundwork for exploring how identities shape teaching styles and how teachers and learners negotiate, resist, and co-construct pedagogical practices (Alexander, 2000).

Teaching styles in action: Classroom realities and ripple effects

While acknowledging this continuum, I placed five teachers at the *guru* end and five at the *abhibhawak* end of the continuum; twelve were a blend of both styles. Although both identities historically encompass elements of authority and care (Sharma, 2013), in the findings, the *guru* style manifested primarily through authority, and the *abhibhawak* style through relational care. The analysis focuses on these extremes while recognising that most teachers blended both styles.

Despite their differences, both styles shared underlying assumptions. Teachers believed their approaches served the best interests of learners and would optimise learning outcomes. This legitimacy was reinforced by cultural norms that positioned teachers above students in the social hierarchy, granting them authority to take whatever steps were necessary to ensure success (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021; Sharma, 2013). Both identities also reflected a dual conception of learning: one rooted in textbook content delivered in the classroom, and another linked to experiential knowledge gained through living and interacting with the world.

These shared values shaped practice, but their enactment produced contrasting ripple effects, either perpetuating existing norms or challenging them, creating distinct karmic cycles of teaching and learning.

The *guru* (the knowledgeable authority) teaching style

> *A story in the Mahabharat: Eklavya was a tribal prince who, because of his group, was denied archery training by the most eminent teacher, Dronacharya. However, Eklavya built a clay statue of Dronacharya and practised archery. It was later discovered that Eklavya was a better archer than Dronacharya's star student, Arjun. Dronacharya asked for his gurudakshina (teacher fee) in the form of his thumb, which Eklavya offered willingly without any qualms.*

This story reflects one depiction of the *guru*, as a knowledgeable figure whose authority commands devotion and unquestioning obedience.

Cultural foundations of the guru ideal

The findings indicated that five teachers, all male and on permanent contracts, positioned themselves as *gurus*, with students as *shishyas* (*Chapter 2*) (Bista, 1991), suggesting gendered and structural dimensions to identity formation. These teachers perceived their role through a traditional Nepali/Hindu/Sanskrit lens, asserting authority, higher status, prestige, and legitimacy over learners (Bista, 1991).

This social positioning and, subsequently, the style were based on the assumption that teachers were custodians of knowledge and moral righteousness who taught through oral transmission (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021), while learners were expected to receive knowledge by listening (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021). The expectation was that students were to be obedient and compliant as an act of *bhakti* (devotion/faith/reverence) (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021; Sharma, 2013). Students were to learn everything and demonstrate their learning in accordance with the set expectations.

The importance of learning by being attentive and listening

These teachers believed learning only happened through their instruction and students' listening. They strongly thought that learning required students to be well-behaved, disciplined, and fully attentive. Subhas (T, Shree Maya, I) spoke of how it was "essential for a student to give their undivided attention to understand what is being explained." Teachers justified listening as not passive, as in the past, because they often asked children to respond to questions, since it was believed that "If a student pays attention, they can always answer correctly" (Tenzin,T, Shree Maya, I). This was seen as evidence that teachers had adapted their styles to 'progressive approaches'.

These classroom practices also need to be understood within the broader structural and material conditions in which teachers work. Teachers viewed this as the most useful teaching method due to resource limitations and classroom realities (O'Sullivan, 2002). Moreover, teachers' beliefs that learning occurs through listening techniques further reinforced this approach (Brinkmann, 2019).

These contradictions ultimately reinforced the continued focus on tangible outcomes, thereby reinforcing the existing practice cycle.

Compliance equated with engagement

However, these practices indicated that participation was treated as compliance rather than engagement. These interactions were often superficial, as shown in *Chapter 8*: reciting the exact text after the teacher, answering the same question verbatim, copying from the text, writing neatly, and pronouncing words the 'proper way'. All these were markers of an 'educated' and 'disciplined' person in Nepali schools (Caddell, 2007b; Phyak, 2021b; Thebe Limbu, 2021). Moreover, it is important to remember that interaction is not necessarily learning, as children looked at the teacher's face when reading together, indicating they were following the class rather than actually reading. These were extensive exercises in rote learning, aiming for visible progress through textbook content. When learners recited content, they looked at the teacher rather than the book. Therefore, this process of interaction cannot be considered genuine engagement in learning, as children are simply reacting rather than constructing knowledge or learning skills (Schweisfurth, 2013). Similarly, Barrett (2007) argues that the Tanzanian teachers in her study superficially used some of the progressive child-centred approaches without engaging with the underlying principles or considering whether children were actually learning.

These *guru* teachers emphasised 'tangible evidence of learning' which was based on 'good handwriting', 'clean presentation of working, including margins'. They also placed importance on children accurately answering the questions, both verbally and in writing. In doing this, the answers had to be what was in the textbook. Consequently, knowledge in school was based on the textbook, and therefore the policy's mandate of "moving away from textbooks and constructing knowledge" (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; MoEST, 2022) had little influence on this belief or the practice.

This reinforced the need for learning to align with the teacher's established expectations through tangible output, which was further reinforced by the contextual realities. First, all teachers reflected on how they had learnt in school through this style. All of them grew up in schools with resource constraints and, therefore, relied solely on textbooks and teachers' oral

transmission. This conviction was shaped by cultural values and teachers' own schooling histories (Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008), where learning meant listening to the teacher and memorising textbook content. Many recalled how their teachers employed this method and attributed their own academic success, particularly in high-stakes examinations such as those administered by the TSC, to it. Here, learning was equated with marks, a common belief across many low-income countries (Guthrie, 2017; Sakata et al., 2022). Therefore, the emphasis on demonstrating learning through tangible outcomes is deeply rooted in shared social norms and teachers' personal experiences (Sarangapani, 2003a; Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021).

Similarly, structural factors also reinforce the importance on 'tangible learning'. This is because structures, including policies intended to encourage change, often reinforced these practices by designing the National Curriculum to be highly prescriptive ("write three sound words in English", grade one) (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). Additionally, these learning outcomes, particularly exam results, continue to become indicators of 'success' or 'failure'.

Furthermore, contradictions within policies highlight the continued need to focus on tangible outcomes. This is especially evident in the examination system. While the government has adopted CAS and stresses ongoing feedback and formative assessments (CDC, 2007, 2019), ironically, under the new federal system, teachers were not observed preparing the question papers for the terminal exams. Rather, the local authorities set standard question papers for these terminal exams. This again defeats the policy vision of moving away from high-stakes examinations. The performance in these exams was more significant because of the government's model school selection scheme. The selection was made primarily on the basis of exam results (MoE, 2016). Again, exam results were an important indicator of success.

These trends resonate with existing research indicating that many classrooms in LICs are primarily centred on teachers delivering lessons while students listen (Sakata et al., 2022). Subsequently, it reflects the existing pedagogical nexus where assumptions about success lead to pedagogical practices that are intertwined with embedded structures and cultural assumptions (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019).

Respect, fear, punishment and legitimacy

Another feature of the *guru* teaching style was the importance they placed on the respect they received from their students. For them, respect was demonstrated through fear. The respect almost served as a validation of their competency. This belief is deeply rooted in the *guru-shishya* tradition, where the teacher is held in higher esteem and regarded as wiser and more experienced than the students (Bista, 1991; Mathema, 2007). These cultural assumptions give teachers the legitimacy to do whatever is necessary to ensure a child learns, including corporal punishment or insulting them to achieve learning goals. Other literature on Nepal has also documented the prevalence of such styles, such as Valentin (2006), Caddell (2007b),and Phyak (2022) showing that teachers often resort to punitive measures to achieve 'learning' based on outcomes. This is evidence of the belief that fear-based respect, reinforced by punitive measures, enables these practices to persist over time in spite of policy directives and laws.

Subsequently, these teachers believed that the respect students demonstrated directly signalled their legitimacy. Respect was equated with "deep reverence" (Tenzin, T, Shree Maya, I), "unquestioning obedience" (Subhas, T, Shree Maya, CO), and "absolute silence" (Namrata, T, Shree Siddhartha, CO). This in turn equated to fear (Harber, 2015b), and quiet, compliant classrooms were preferred, as they were working in 'under-resourced schools'. Fear was instilled through punitive actions (Hargreaves, 2017), often justified by teachers' own experiences of similar treatment (Clarke, 2003). This reflects how teachers modelled practices they had encountered themselves (Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008). For instance, Saugat (T, Shree Saraswati, I) recounted "as a student, I (he) deeply respected his teachers to an extent where he was not even able to look them in the eyes." Here, respect, like learning outcomes, was narrowly defined by teacher expectations rather than mutual negotiation (Schweisfurth, 2013).

These teachers were conscious of how they were received or perceived by outsiders (including me) and their students. They repeatedly reminded me of their legitimacy as educators, often citing their status as "government staff employees" who had passed rigorous examinations to secure permanent positions. This credential was tangible evidence of their competency and

capability as teachers. It also reflected a deeper contextual assumption of how competency and capacity are to be externally evaluated and assessed (Barrett, 2008; Jessop and Penny, 1998).

Additionally, the status and security that passing the exam brought, in essence fulfilled the 'promise of education' by ensuring that these teachers did desk jobs and no longer 'backward' agricultural work (Karki, 2023; Pigg, 1992). It also further reinforced the belief in the value of examinations as an important measure. This illustrates how policies have unintended consequences (Carney and Bista, 2009).

Teachers adopting the *guru* teaching style felt compelled to prove their "legitimacy and ability" and their "positional respect" (Tao, 2013, 2016), not only to me as a researcher but also to their students, and sometimes to themselves. This is possibly because Nepali teachers occupy two opposing narratives: on one hand, revered as morally upright and sacred individuals (Sharma, 2013); on the other, criticised for absenteeism (Mathema, 2007), lack of accountability (Karki, 2014; Parajuli and Onta, 2021), politicisation (Pherali, 2013), rigidity, and poor training (Ham, 2018) (see Chapters 2 and 6 for detailed discussion). These deficit narratives are perpetuated by policies that portray teachers as incompetent (MoEST, 2022), without considering the lived realities they face (Anderson, 2023).

As one student explained, "Many of the teachers who hit us for even having a wrong expression on our faces were doing so because they are frustrated in their own lives and so they take out the anger on us" (Grade 4, S, Shree Maya, CWS). Consequently, teachers reported that their legitimacy was continually questioned by unrealistic policy expectations that guaranteed failure (Kamal, T, Shree Siddhartha, I). Such narratives furthered teachers' need to prove their legitimacy, placing even greater value on tangible outputs such as appropriate behaviour and respect, exam results, correct pronunciation, and neat handwriting (Guthrie, 2017). Such emphasis on tangible, measurable outputs by the authorities meant that they increasingly relied on these metrics to affirm their legitimacy.

Despite the prohibition of corporal punishment (Government of Nepal, 2018) and repeated policy directives urging teachers to create a learning environment "free from fear" (MoEST, 2022), these practices continued. This persistence

highlights the symbolic nature of policy efforts (Ball, 1994). It further reinforces the argument that teachers' values reinterpret policies, and without addressing these values reforms cannot bring envisioned changes (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). There were no consequences for hitting children; instead, it was often discussed as part of 'Nepali culture'. However, just because it is culturally embedded does not make it legitimate (Guthrie et al., 2015; Sarangapani, 2003a).

Although teachers employing this teaching style felt they were being scapegoated by others blaming them for the poor performance of schools and students, they also displayed deficit narratives when children failed to obey. This was evident during lessons. The use of deficit narratives reflects entrenched inequalities in Nepali society (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008; Shields and Rappleye, 2008a).

Power imbalances

It is essential to note that power imbalances were present in all three schools, particularly at Shree Maya and Shree Siddhartha. There is plenty of literature that speaks about how the Nepali education system continues to be exclusionary, inaccessible to ethnic minorities and marginalised groups (Parajuli and Onta, 2021; Phyak, 2022; Pradhan, 2020a); however, there is limited discussion on how these inequalities persist and manifest within everyday schooling.

Teachers often justified punitive actions to address the lack of tangible progress by blaming the learner. They were called "useless" or statements such as, "No wonder you are useless; you are probably an unwanted illegitimate child of someone" (Namrata, T, Shree Siddhartha, CO). This included attributing issues to the child belonging to the wrong kind of family (uneducated, unstable, uncultured, broken families, irresponsible parents who were not invested in their child's education) or to supposed incapacity (lazy, silly, fragile, disrespectful, disobedient, stubborn, hopeless, flawed characters). These broader inequalities shaped how authority operated in classrooms, reinforcing the imbalanced power relations within which *guru* style practices were enacted.

This pattern can be interpreted through two lenses: first, teachers refusing to take ownership of the learning process (Jessop and Penny, 1998); second, to understand the cultural logics they are part of. Bista (1991) (see *Chapter 2*)

argues that Nepali society is characterised by fatalism, in which people believe they lack the capacity to fix problems and this is part of their *karma*. As a result, within this fatalistic logic, it was assumed that if these children truly had the potential, they would not behave in this way (Bista, 1991). By shifting the blame onto the children, the teachers can be said to also be "saving their faces" (Wedin, 2010). This again perpetuates the karmic cycle, representing a pedagogical nexus in which teachers felt helpless and blamed students, which, in turn, led children to disengage from learning and underperform (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019).

Therefore, it can be argued that this approach was not a deliberate resistance to LCE reform policies. Instead, it reflected the cultural contexts in which teachers operated (Alexander, 2000; Brinkmann, 2019). While LCE reforms in Nepal aimed to shift teachers from being sole authorities to co-constructing knowledge, teachers who used the *guru* style were neither influenced by nor observed implementing these directives.

It is also equally important not to dismiss this approach as simply "traditional" or "backward" (Guthrie, 2017). Teaching styles cannot change overnight. The existing literature on LCE shows that classroom authority in LICs is culturally rooted (Tabulawa, 2013). However, shared values regarding intergenerational authority and didactic methods do not translate into identical classroom practices (Guthrie et al., 2015; Vavrus, 2009). Nor should practices be accepted uncritically simply because they are culturally sanctioned (Guthrie et al., 2015). Instead, there must be a reflection on how authority manifests in classrooms and its implications for learning.

These styles are not fixed. While broader cultural norms are shared, individual factors and personal experiences shape how authority is enacted. Culture itself is non-homogeneous and constantly renegotiated (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b), a point essential when examining authoritarian or authoritative teaching styles. It also highlights why it is critical for policies such as SESP to consider these cultural assumptions rather than prescribing universalistic criteria for reforms.

Learner experiences and negotiations within the *guru* teaching style

An important aspect that is often overlooked is how children navigate teachers' teaching and their learning experiences (Adamson and Brown, 2024; Sakata,

2022). This section will discuss how learners experienced learning in lessons with *guru* style, what they perceived as knowledge and how they navigated their day-to-day learning experiences.

Navigating and negotiating what counts as knowledge

A majority of the children believed that the textbook was central to learning. Just like the teachers, they placed importance on 'knowing the textbook'. They also placed great importance on exam marks, sharing their teachers' belief that good marks led to better opportunities. Many students across the three schools also viewed their education as a means of improving their families' lifestyles (Karki, 2023; Pigg, 1992). Many children said that memorising the text was not enough. Instead, they emphasised the importance of writing answers "in their own words". This distinction signals learners' agency in shaping what counts as 'real learning', challenging the assumption that they are passive recipients of teacher-defined knowledge (Burman, 2016). It reflects a micro-level negotiation within the broader pedagogical nexus, where structural norms and individual strategies intersect. It also shows how they identified what was working for them and what was not (Hargreaves, 2017). This negotiation suggests that learners are not merely adapting to teacher expectations but actively redefining what constitutes legitimate learning within the structures.

Navigating teacher expectations through compliance

Subsequently, the students focused on complying with the teacher and managing their moods rather than on learning. Students shared how they prioritised compliance to avoid trouble by "paying attention to the teacher", "looking at their faces", and "answering the questions" (both written and oral). They shared that their priority was to ensure they had excellent handwriting, presented neat work, and pronounced words correctly when reading or answering questions. This exemplifies the 'hidden curriculum' (Adamson and Brown, 2024). Such compliance strategies demonstrate how the children navigated *guru*-styled practices and experiences in class. This strategy in turn reproduces not just the power structures but also a pattern of pedagogical practices that focuses on meeting teacher expectations, feeding back to existing practices, and reinforcing a pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) driven by teachers' beliefs of what constitutes learning

(Brinkmann, 2019). This cycle of compliance and reinforcement illustrates how structural norms persist despite reform ideals.

Another aspect the students valued was feedback, which they did not receive adequately from these teachers. They spoke of how feedback was used to control behaviour. It was often cited as evidence that students were "not good enough" or "lacking in skills". This instrumental use of feedback highlights the persistent tension between policy ideals of formative assessment and its enactment as a disciplinary tool. It reveals how reform directives are reinterpreted through existing power relations rather than being transformative (Carney and Rappleye, 2011).

This awareness of their environment and how they navigated daily teaching-learning practices shows that children were not merely reacting to teacher prompts. They were actively making choices to manage and navigate teacher expectations (Sriprakash, 2016). Their active negotiation also pre-empts national policies that extensively promote "creating space for children", whereas they are already doing so themselves (MoEST, 2022). It also highlights that just because students are active does not necessarily mean learning is occurring (Schweisfurth, 2013). This may also help explain why children's reading and numeracy skills are consistently reported as falling short of standards (UNICEF Nepal, 2018). Therefore, the focus is not on learning, but rather on the accuracy or presentation of the content.

Peer learning and exercise of agency beyond teachers

Interestingly, across the three schools, instances demonstrated how students did not solely rely on the teacher for furthering their learning. As we saw in *Chapter 10*, on dialogic teaching-learning, when teachers were absent, students engaged in learning by turning to the "more knowledgeable" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS) (the More Knowledgeable Other/MKO, see *Chapter 4*) and asking questions they would be hesitant to ask their teachers. "When I ask student X, she explains things to me, multiple times. She does not get angry at me. I can even ask her questions, like why it is this way, not that way, and she and I talk about it. But with most teachers, if I were to take this long to understand and ask so many questions, I would get hit two times more than I already do" (S, Shree Maya, CWS).

These peer-led sessions indicate that, in several observed cases, learning took place through peer interactions. However, this phenomenon requires further in-depth study. This also reflects how children actively create and recreate their cultural contexts (Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024). However, these peer-learning moments were possible only in the absence of these teachers, showing that learner agency existed but was tightly constrained by everyday authority structures. The students were seen creating learning spaces on their own terms across all three schools, without undermining teachers. These cracks in the karmic cycle signal possible subtle challenges to traditional norms, even as systemic structures continue to reproduce authority through classroom practices.

The findings contradict Guthrie's (2013) argument about how students accepted formalism as part of the culture, as their experiences are built on these epistemological foundations. Similarly, Tabulawa's (1998) study on geography students also highlighted their preference for classrooms governed by formalism. However, it is essential to recognise that conditions have changed since these studies were conducted. LCE literature also discusses that LCE reforms are often misplaced because they do not fit the cultural contexts of many LICs (Bremner et al., 2022). While this is true, it is also crucial to consider how some students actively negotiated these expectations. They are cautiously pushing the normative boundaries of what constitutes learning, as they felt they had limited space to explore in the lessons of these teachers.

Navigating power dynamics through agency, resistance and silence

Drawing on *Chapter 9*, many students felt that the *guru* teaching style reinforced rigid distance and power imbalances between children and teachers. Students shared how teachers wanted them to be 'statues' during lessons, as one student put it, "We have to sit like statues. if we move or look confused, they get angry" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). They felt that teachers used excessive and unjustified punishments. A student explained, "When he gets angry, he lashes out. It is not because we did something big, just small things" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). This made many children feel like they had "no space to ask questions or make mistakes." As a result, there was a "non-existent relationship based on fear." Consequently, many students felt they learnt very little in class and did not feel accountable to their teachers.

Some learners managed power differences by using strategies to avoid trouble (Chaudhary et al., 2017; Koirala-Azad, 2008). Resistance and other tactics were part of their everyday life (Hargreaves, 2017). These strategies were developed through cultural interactions and became habitual (Chaudhary et al., 2017). Typically, students mainly obeyed teachers and rarely challenged authority (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021). When they did challenge authority, it was often in groups, like talking with friends or eating during class unnoticed. Peers supported each other when reprimanded. The students often relied on one another in class as a support mechanism to cope with the teacher's angry outbursts (e.g., a peer whispering the answer to a student who could not answer a question, or assisting one another to avoid getting into trouble).

Children also used silence as a form of resistance by ignoring teachers (Koirala-Azad, 2008; San Pedro, 2015). Some skipped classes to avoid teachers. They often felt oppressed by teachers who prioritised social control over helping learners or improving learning (Devine, 2003). As one student explained, "Being silent is better than answering incorrectly" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). These experiences challenged teachers' authority and revealed that children were not passive but actively negotiating and navigating their learning environments (Hargreaves, 2017).

These insights from the learners are a key finding of this study. As discussed in Chapters *2* and *6*, much of the discourse focuses on how policies such as LCE are misaligned with teachers' cultural logics and beliefs (Brinkmann, 2019). However, children actively define and choose how they prefer to learn (Hargreaves, 2017), a perspective often overlooked despite its significant influence on teaching and learning. This is also ignored by national policies, which mostly assume children 'need to be taught' (MoEST, 2021, 2022), rather than recognising that children can also contribute to understanding why things are the way they are.

Another key dynamic involves how teachers regard respect and how students interpret it. Learners distinguished obedience from respect, noting that "a person who is older than us does not get automatic respect." One student explained this distinction by saying, "There are certain teachers whom I say good morning to every time I see them, no matter the time of day, because I don't want to get into trouble. I do not say *namaste*, because it does not come

from the heart" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). This reflects shifting norms while still recognising cultural expectations of respecting elders (Sarangapani, 2003a, 2003c). Students also felt "injustice" in their treatment, describing instances of being belittled or hit without justification.

One possible explanation for this observation, aside from the learners' shared perceptions, is that they also had access to a wider range of information through the internet, particularly TikTok and YouTube, where cultural assumptions are often challenged (through more coverage of issues such as teachers abusing their power and harming children, and children's rights). As a result, Nepali society and its cultural value of unquestioning obedience as a mark of respect are also changing and evolving (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018). However, this warrants further exploration, and these findings are only a glimpse and are not generalisable.

Many students judged the teacher's legitimacy based on their actions (Hargreaves, 2017). There was a shared understanding that some teachers lacked expertise in their subjects, although this was not communicated to them. According to learners, these teachers neglected their responsibilities by failing to check homework, provide feedback, mark exams properly, prepare for lessons, arrive on time, or teach effectively, while using their mobile phones in class. Most importantly, they "did not care about us" (S, Shree Maya, CO/CWS) enough to have a relationship with their students. The students felt they were seen as being "small" and "worthless". This intensified their sense of injustice because teachers held authority over students rather than collaborating with them (Harber, 2015b).

At the same time, most students across the three schools emphasised the importance of not publicly embarrassing their teachers, regardless of their behaviour. Students highlighted the importance of protecting their teachers, "saving face" (Wedin, 2010), because they still valued them. As one student explained, "Not liking a teacher is one thing, but making them look bad is another. After all, we don't want our teachers to be negatively viewed in your university" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). This aligns with Sakata et al. (2017), who observed that children in their Tanzanian study recognised a social norm where teachers, as sources of knowledge, should not be challenged.

In this light, national education policies portray learners as "blank slates" who need to be "taught the values of being a responsible citizen in a socially just democratic society" (MoE, 2016; MoEST, 2022). This finding supports Hopkins and Sriprakash's (2016a) critique of the universalised child discourse. They argue that children are often removed from their contexts and treated as homogeneous, reactive beings, thereby stripping them of their agency (ibid.). In reality, learners rationalised teachers' behaviours, attributing punitive actions to personal frustrations rather than their own shortcomings. This intellectualisation was part of the hidden curriculum (Westbrook et al., 2013), where learners pieced together information and drew conclusions. This exemplifies how learners actively shaped their learning contexts by negotiating power dynamics (Moreno Medrano, 2016).

The *abhibhawak* teaching style

This is an excerpt of a conversation I had with one of the parents of a student whom I taught. The sentiment reflected here is a deeply cultural belief that teachers are just as responsible as parents in raising children:

> *Please take care of my daughter as if she were yours. I give you full rights and responsibility to help ensure my daughter grows to her potential. Just like us, you will also make a lasting impression on her. She will emulate you, so please make sure you help us raise a good human being.*

This expectation of teachers as parental figures underpins the second distinct teaching style identified in the findings.

Authority and care are perceived as part of parental responsibility

In contrast to the *guru* teaching style, the *abhibhawak* style is one in which teachers position themselves as parental figures to their students; five teachers' practices could be placed under this teaching style. All five were female and held temporary contracts. Out of them, two were *Newar*s, two were *Bahun*, and one was a *Chettri*. This positioning illustrates how authority and care are culturally legitimised through parental metaphors rather than egalitarian ideals promoted by LCE policies (Tabulawa, 2003). It indicates a relational ontology where moral responsibility takes precedence over technical compliance (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017).

This teaching style emphasised building relationships with students. While the teachers valued authority, they strived for "legitimate authority" (Hargreaves, 2017). They prioritised learners' comfort in the classroom. Respect was not something learners were expected to 'give' but something that would naturally emerge from sharing a relationship. Respect for these teachers was not equated with compliance. Their priority was to ensure the well-being of their students. This reflects the parental responsibility they felt towards their students (Sarangapani, 2003a, 2003b).

Hierarchy negotiated through relational authority and legitimacy

Abhibhawak teachers made it clear they were not equals or friends with their students. They positioned themselves as parental figures, a value deeply embedded in shared culture (Sharma, 2013). This contradicts the policy assumption of how implementing LCE would make teacher-student relations less hierarchical (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; MoEST, 2022). However, this directive ignores the fact that even within this relational approach, hierarchical norms in the Nepali context persist because authority is culturally legitimised through age and experience (Pigg, 1996). This example further supports critiques of reform policies written in vague language that often remain unimplemented due to cultural interpretations and rejection stemming from perceived misalignments with local contexts (Schweisfurth, 2013).

This further adds evidence to the existing discourses of how travelling policies such as LCE often ignore contextually embedded values, contributing to further misalignment with local realities (Schweisfurth, 2013; Tabulawa, 2003). It also resonates with Jessop and Penny's (1998) relational frame, through which teachers in Gambia and South Africa engaged in teaching and learning.

Corporal punishment and scolding were occasionally used, but teachers framed these actions as parental, focusing on addressing specific actions. They did not use deficit narratives or attribute the failure to learners' contextual or personal realities. Consequences were often set collectively, reinforcing mutuality between students and teachers (see *Chapter 10*). While corporal punishment is banned (Government of Nepal, 2018), its social acceptance complicates reform. Students perceived these actions as justified when agreed upon beforehand,

with one student explaining, “If we make mistakes, then it is fair that we get punished a little bit” (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS).

However, even in these negotiated spaces, the power dynamics remain unequal, with teachers retaining the authority. It is therefore important to recognise that even in negotiated spaces, the use of corporal punishment continues to operate within culturally legitimised yet unequal power relations. This raises an important question: Does it still qualify as a violation of rights? On paper, according to national policies, it does. It sharply contrasts with policy visions of “fear-free, friendly” classrooms (MoEST, 2021, 2022). These policy ideals assume that relational dynamics can be switched at will or exist in binary form. They also suppose that corporal punishment can be banned overnight. Instead, these findings show that authority can be negotiated within existing contextual frameworks of care and parental responsibility, not erased, a nuance often missing in reform discourses.

Knowledge and learning in classrooms were still centred on textbooks. Unlike the *guru* style, however, the teachers here regarded learning outcomes as just one indicator of learning; for them, progress through encouragement was key. Since they were not entirely focused on ensuring ‘tangible learning’, their lessons allowed space for children to contribute their own thoughts by saying things such as, “remember, when you talk in my class, it is not noise” (June, T, Shree Maya, CO), or they felt the need to make lessons “enjoyable” (Sneha, T, Shree Maya, I/CO) for the children.

Observations revealed that lessons created space for learners to express themselves through conversations and questions with peers and teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). This included using “applause” or repeating positive affirmations. One student explained how they could “breathe and laugh as loudly as she wanted to in June’s class without worrying about getting into trouble” (S, Shree Maya, CWS). Many students openly discussed personal experiences either one-on-one or during lessons. The teachers valued students’ individuality and experiences (Barrett, 2008; Jessop and Penny, 1998). Their focus was on fostering comfort and well-being, accepting students unconditionally regardless of ability or background (Anderson, 2021). This reflects a locally adapted teaching style that emphasises relationships and student well-being. Here, the emphasis on relationality and well-being aligns

with Schweisfurth's MS2 for LCE (2013) but emerges organically from negotiated cultural norms rather than from policy implementation. This suggests a possibility of realising a contextualised form of learner-centredness, one that is relational rather than procedural.

Although teachers maintained control over lessons, there was a genuine sense that learners were actively involved in the teaching and learning process. Students were not merely responding to instructions. This approach did not prioritise strict control. Instead, teachers fostered collaborative environments, validating students' experiences and emphasising the importance of creating a comfortable learning atmosphere. Teachers believed that if children did not feel at ease, their attention would shift from meaningful engagement to simply trying to please the teacher. Teachers including Rupashree encouraged students to "take their time to read" or "think about the sound and the way it is written and then pronounce it" (T, Shree Saraswati, CO). Additionally, students were not punished for mistakes; rather, encouragement and applause were used to motivate them.

Unlike *guru*-style teachers, they did not feel pressured to 'save face' or prove legitimacy (Wedin, 2010). This openness helped build a further positive learning atmosphere based on personal relationships and awareness of learners' circumstances (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). Contrary to Tao (2013), who argues teachers may hide weaknesses, these teachers admitted not knowing everything, creating space for multiple discourses, a principle central to LCE reforms (Schweisfurth, 2013). This illustrates the importance of not essentialising teachers or reducing their roles to a single narrative (Tao, 2016).

These highly contextual practices contributed to creating positive learning spaces (Anderson, 2021, 2023). Although the teaching techniques resembled those used by teachers adopting a *guru* style, learners seemed more engaged in the learning process because they were expected to be on their own, sit as they wanted, understand the content, listen to their friends, answer questions in their own words, and ask peers questions (CO, Shree Siddhartha/Shree Maya). As Sneha (T, Shree Maya, I) explained, if her children "were responsive and active in class, it meant her lessons were enjoyable, and students were learning." Therefore, students were not 'burdened' with managing teachers' moods, as

obedience and engagement in lessons were not driven by fear ((Harber, 2015b; Hargreaves, 2017).

This shift from fear-based compliance to relational engagement disrupts the karmic cycle of reform failure discussed earlier. It shows how contextual practices grounded in shared beliefs can create spaces where learners feel comfortable, even in resource-constrained environments. While the effectiveness of learning was beyond the scope of the study, these lessons were clearly experienced as more engaging. Nonetheless, it remains significant to consider how these lessons were more engaging within the same contextual realities in which the teachers who ascribed to *guru*-style teaching operated. This further supports the argument that pedagogical practices are deeply contextual and evolving (Alexander, 2015).

Learner autonomy and negotiated authority

Something that was not present in the *guru*'s teaching style in the lessons was the sense of negotiated autonomy that learners felt. Learners felt they could "be themselves" (S, Shree Maya, AWS). The children were not expected to sit or behave in a particular way in classes taught in this *abhibhawak* style. Learners were also asked about their interests and what they wanted to do in some of the lessons, as discussed in Chapters *8* and *10*. This was usually asked across the three schools on Fridays, when learners could choose not to study and participate in a fun activity, such as a singing competition, because they were too tired, or they were given a different set of exercises. This gave learners the autonomy to decide what would be done in the classroom (Hargreaves, 2017).

It also appeared that learners became more willing to ask questions without worrying about their relevance, "or being afraid of being hit" (S, Shree Maya, Shree Saraswati, CWS/AWS), thereby engaging more fully with learning (MS1) (Schweisfurth, 2013). As one grade seven student explained, "Samita ma'am notices immediately if we become distracted. She then asks what's wrong and changes things around if necessary" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). Peer learning occurred simultaneously during these lessons, in which teachers encouraged students to collaborate to understand the texts or assess their conceptual clarity.

Unlike in the *guru* teaching style lessons, this was not a component that happened without the teacher's knowledge or was done to protect friends. Instead, it was integral to the learning environment. This is evidence of how a positive learning atmosphere led learners to be more involved in the learning process. Autonomy here was negotiated and was not absolute. It was embedded within hierarchical norms, yet learners had space to express themselves. This complicates binary framings of LCE versus TCE (Schweisfurth, 2013). Rather, it highlights the importance of "learning centred-ness" (Barrett, 2007; Lattimer, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2004).

Such a classroom culture enabled even students in highly populated classrooms to be actively involved in the learning process (Akello et al., 2016). Although questioning remained the main method of teaching and learning, a Nepali version of dialogic teaching seemed to emerge in these resource-constrained classrooms, and learners continued to actively participate in lessons (Alexander, 2018). Learners had the space to express their opinions, even when they disagreed with the teacher, or shared experiences during lessons where appropriate (Lattimer, 2015). In Samita's highly populated classrooms, they jointly decided on the classroom rules such as "When someone speaks, we listen," and 'We raise our hands and wait for our turn to speak" (Shree Siddhartha, CO). They built on their existing knowledge and experiences together in class (Alexander, 2018), even though the teachers used techniques similar to those of *guru*-style teaching, but with a different application. Again, whether it was complete dialogic teaching cannot be determined, but it resonated with some of the principles of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2018).

The pedagogical practices observed in these lessons were deeply contextual (Anderson, 2023; Lattimer, 2015; Thompson, 2013). These techniques stemmed from "parental knowledge" and teachers' personal sense of what works (Croft, 2002), not from LCE's policy visions. This illustrates how dialogic tendencies emerged as culturally adapted practices rather than imported reforms or policy directives. Taken together, this reinforces the argument for exploring the importance of understanding existing pedagogical practices to find contextually relevant opportunities for learning (Schweisfurth, 2013, 2025b).

These teachers openly spoke about feeling not good enough because they had not passed the TSC exams, which are required to move to permanent contracts.

Although assessing the nature of the TSC exams is beyond the scope of this study, it raises questions about which skills are assessed. It also highlights how these teachers were not adequately professionally supported. Unlike the *gurus*, these teachers did not feel pressured to prove their legitimacy to me. Instead, they frequently asked how they could improve or what I thought of their teaching practices. Teachers repeatedly linked their approach to personal experiences of learning, recalling how they had not enjoyed learning in classrooms governed by fear (Ham and Menzie-Ballantyne, 2021); Ham, 2021, 2022). Drawing on their own experiences, they believed that children need to feel 'seen' for learning to occur. This shows they were engaged in self-reflection (Biesta et al., 2014), even without realising that this was what much of the policy reforms aimed to encourage (Jessop and Penny, 1998).

Teachers often stated that policies "were not designed for them, as they did not have the ability to understand or implement them" (Sabita, Shree Siddhartha, I). This is evidence again that the policies were not influencing the practice of these teachers. As Barrett (2008) challenges, taking practices at face value without examining the beliefs and values that drive them raises important questions about whether such recommended approaches can genuinely lead to learning or to LCE. I invite the reader to reflect on this. Ultimately, the *abhibhawak* teaching style illustrates how authority and care can coexist within culturally legitimised hierarchies, creating spaces where learners feel valued and supported. These remain shaped by norms that challenge the universalist vision of LCE. These findings also suggest that the *abhibhawak* approach does not simply resist reform but reinterprets it through cultural contexts of care and shared meanings of moral responsibility. This may help open up discussions for contextualising LCE in Nepal, not by abandoning global ideals, but by embedding them within relational frameworks that resonate with local epistemologies and contextual realities (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Learner experiences and negotiations within the abhibhawak teaching style

The contrast in how learners engaged and interacted during lessons varied depending on whether the *guru* style or the *abhibhawak* approach was used. The *abhibhawak* style, in particular, generated different ripples in classroom interactions, helping to create new cycles of pedagogical practices. These

practices shaped learners' experiences in distinct ways, as the following account illustrates:

> *"I enjoy lessons where I feel free. Where we don't get shouted at, hit, or made to feel useless for not answering or writing the right answer." (Grade one, S, Shree Maya, CWS)"*

Drawing mainly on Chapters *8*, *9* and *10*, while the textbook was central to learning, students appreciated the comfort they felt when studying with teachers who used the *abhibhawak* teaching style. They believed that the teachers were fair and their moods were predictable and cheerful, contrasting with the *guru* styles. Students were not shouted at or beaten without reason. They also felt confident that their work would not be judged solely on presentation, handwriting, or cleanliness, reducing the worry of upsetting teachers. Taken together, these experiences illustrate how relational care shaped a distinct learning environment for learners.

Another common feature appreciated by many students of teachers who used the *abhibhawak* teaching style was the sense of dependability and predictability in their lessons. Classes were "always planned" and teachers came "prepared" and they knew what they would be doing in class, which helped create a stable and comfortable learning environment. Furthermore, they engaged in a variety of tasks where they had a say, and since the lessons "built on their responses", they had to focus. Here, the learners believed that their contributions helped shape the learning (Fielding, 2001). Additionally, it is important to note that the learners felt their opinions were valued and heard (Lundy, 2007), something that the policies envision (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; MoEST, 2022). It is interesting to note that some of the children's positive experiences seem to align, unknowingly, with the policy visions, something that the policymakers probably had not factored in. This may also reflect the changing expectations of learning in Nepali society (Ham and Menzie-Ballantyne, 2021).

Michael Fielding (2007) argues that for children to engage in meaningful learning and feel a sense of belonging in school, they must be acknowledged, valued and be able to contribute to the common good. The children in the study also valued this sentiment. They spoke of how the teachers who used the *abhibhawak* teaching style "knew their names", "knew about their families and circumstances", and "still thought they had potential to do well" (a student

talking about June, T, from Shree Maya). It not only validated them as individuals but also made them believe they were capable of "contributing to learning and learning themselves."

The validation did not only come from teachers knowing their students, but also from how teachers conducted themselves. This included teachers not skipping lessons, arriving for class on time, arriving for class prepared, and following up and providing feedback on both homework and assessments (examinations). All these actions were experienced by learners as evidence to the children that they "mattered enough" and the teachers "genuinely cared for them". This made them feel valued and visible (Hargreaves, 2017). It is again evidence of how learners actively perceive and interpret teachers' behaviour, which in turn influences how they navigate and engage with the learning process. This reiterates the importance of not viewing children through the 'universal lens' (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b). It is also further evidence of how the learning context is actively negotiated and shaped by learners themselves (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018; Brown, 2025).

Learner agency and negotiated autonomy

Another aspect that they valued in these lessons was the autonomy they felt they had (something they did not have in lessons taught using the *guru* style). This included the freedom to move around, express themselves, disagree, and 'relax' during class, as a student shared how "this allowed me (her) to focus on what was being taught in class" (S, Shree Maya, AWS). Although lessons were loud, teachers did not shout at students to be quiet, and disruptive behaviour was rare. This created a less threatening learning environment (Hargreaves, 2017), indicating that relational care, rather than fear-driven compliance, influenced classroom dynamics and encouraged engagement (Hargreaves, 2017). The comfort students experienced facilitated their focus and participation in lessons. This, in turn, appeared to reduce disruptions and allow teachers to focus on teaching. Despite policies such as SESP instructing teachers to foster a "fear-free" atmosphere (MoEST, 2022), its vague wording may not fully account for the contextual realities discussed in the findings.

Together, these conditions of dependability, predictability, and negotiated autonomy enhanced their relational connection with students, enabling teachers

using the approach to establish "legitimate authority" (Hargreaves, 2017). The teachers invested time and effort in getting to know the students and working closely with them. Many students felt these relationships mirrored the care they received from their parents. Teachers cared for students "like their own" (S, Shree Siddhartha, CWS). They were noted for fulfilling their promises, being honest, and acknowledging when they didn't know something.

Unlike the *guru* teaching style, here teachers and many learners appeared to share similar positive experiences in the learning processes. The approaches used by the teachers helped build trust among students, which appeared to be deeply rooted in shared cultural beliefs and values (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). This trust was not incidental: it reflected how authority and care were negotiated within cultural and contextual realities, shaping classroom dynamics beyond technical compliance. It also contributed to the creation of a pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) in which learners felt safe and valued due to the relational care these teachers provided. This suggests that relationality, rather than prescriptive reform, may be central to fostering learner engagement in Nepali classrooms. This could be a space for further exploration of what contextual learner-centredness might look like (Schweisfurth, 2013).

The relationship they shared also shaped how students interpreted the punishments they received. The students explained that punishments such as hitting or scolding by teachers were seen as justified and fair because they were typically based on mutually agreed-upon consequences and were not 'random'. There was also a belief that teachers, like parents, had their students' best interests at heart, administering discipline for their benefit and telling them what they did was wrong. Students understood that certain actions would lead to specific consequences because these had been discussed and agreed upon in class beforehand, ensuring everyone was on the same page. For example, students in Shree Siddhartha collectively agreed on consequences for inattentiveness, negotiating with Samita (T) whether a slap on the palm or ear-twisting was acceptable. This sense of collaboration made such disciplinary practices feel predictable and fair rather than arbitrary or punitive.

Although these practices technically violated the law (Government of Nepal, 2018), they raise important questions about how students interpreted them. For

the learners in this study, the concern was less about being punished itself and more about whether the consequence felt fair and not arbitrary. This highlights how students exercised agency in making sense of disciplinary actions (Fielding, 2001). This is why it is essential to listen to their interpretations to understand their learning experiences (Brown, 2022; Sriprakash and Hopkins, 2016).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the power dynamics at play. Just because a practice is culturally embedded and accepted does not mean it is justified (Guthrie et al., 2015). Yet it is equally important to recognise the nuances within which these interpretations occur. This also illustrates why policies and laws are not simply implemented or translated as written. Instead, they take on culturally shaped forms in practice, reflecting how policy is reinterpreted within local relational and moral logics (Carney and Bista, 2009; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012).

Many of the children disclosed that they respected these teachers not because they had to, but because they wanted to. They explained that this respect towards these teachers came from their "souls" and was natural because they were "like their parents/family". This self-generated respect indicates a shift from fear-based compliance to teachers holding legitimate authority (Hargreaves, 2017). Such negotiation challenges deficit narratives about learners as passive recipients (McCormick, 2016). This sense of respect was a cultural nuance and shared belief. Although teachers practising the *guru* style also sought this kind of reverence, learners did not attribute it to them because their practices did not generate the same relational connection. This contrast emphasises how beliefs shape pedagogical practices (Alexander, 2000) and why discussions of reforms must account for these relationship dynamics. This highlights how children in this study exercised agency, something that policies guiding LCE do not fully consider (Brown, 2025).

Many children described how the relational connection they shared with their teachers influenced how they approached their learning. This made many of them conscious of not skipping lessons, as "they would be noticed" if absent (S, Shree Siddhartha, AWS), and of "completing their homework" to avoid "disappointing teachers" (S, Shree Maya, CWS). Some felt the need to do their best to meet their teachers' expectations and the "beliefs they showed in them" (S, Shree Maya, Shree Siddhartha, CWS/AWS).

The relationship, therefore, appeared to serve as motivation to engage in the teaching-learning process, showing that they actively chose to work hard to avoid disappointing their teachers. This indicates that accountability was not enforced through fear or compliance but emerged from relational trust. This again contrasts with policy assumptions that structural directives alone can transform classroom dynamics (MoEST, 2022). This sense of fulfilling adults' expectations is deeply rooted in the Nepali value system (Karki, 2023). These findings imply that a possible way to motivate learners may be through the cultural norm of shared respect based on trust and relationality (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017).

Learners described appreciating this teaching style because they felt a bond with their teachers, who saw their potential and believed in them (Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden, 2007). This relational connection had a positive impact on learners, consistent with the literature, which indicates that teachers' beliefs in students foster engagement and learning (Anderson, 2023; Hargreaves, 2017; Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021). These findings suggest that in the Nepali context, learner-centredness may mean learners feeling valued and accepted, as this appears to encourage participation and accountability (Schweisfurth, 2013). While this cannot be generalised given the scope of the study, it offers an important insight for contextualising LCE reforms.

The co-existence of two different karmic cycles: Bringing things together

Drawing on the above discussion, the two teaching styles, the *guru* and the *abhibhawak*, set out two pedagogical nexuses (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) that sit at opposing ends of the spectrum of teaching styles. Both styles are deeply rooted in the Nepali cultural systems. These styles were not mutually exclusive or cleanly distinct, as teachers did not neatly fall into either category. Instead, the majority of teachers used a blend of both pedagogical styles, with some situated more clearly at either end of the spectrum.

To clarify how these two teaching styles operated within their cultural and contextual settings, it was analytically useful to look more closely into the two extremes. Focusing on the extremes of the spectrum illustrated how practices were shaped by the cultural logics and contextual realities that underpin

teachers' identities. This adds to the existing literature on how teacher identity and approaches help explain pedagogical practices, as in Jessop and Penny's (1998) and Barrett's (2008) studies, which developed two separate categorisations of teacher identity. All these were based on contextual realities.

When teachers adopt a *guru*-style approach, it often becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. Their focus is on controlling student behaviour and teaching the content from the book, making sure students learn what they're expected to and earning their respect or reverence. As a result, students focus on pleasing their teachers to avoid severe consequences or withdraw altogether from the learning process, believing they cannot satisfy their teachers or meet the standards teachers set.

This leads to unmet expectations regarding behaviour, learning, and outcomes, which teachers then explain and justify through deficit narratives about students, thereby perpetuating the cycle and exacerbating underperformance. This is further amplified by societal expectations regarding what constitutes success, whereby students are expected to perform well in exams, both by parents, authorities, and themselves. This is coupled with teachers' own beliefs about learning and what constitutes an ideal student. These beliefs were informed by their experiences over the years. These encompassed their school experiences and how they coped with authority. Teachers in the study recounted that many of their own teachers, if not all, employed this style, and thus they experienced it as learners. Subsequently, the process perpetuates the cycle, much like the karmic cycle of birth and rebirth, in which teachers try to teach, but learning does not occur as expected.

Barrett (2008) and Sayed and Ahmed (2015) argue that teaching can operate as an instrumental profession, shaped by the structural conditions and policy discourses that position teachers as a deficit within which teachers work. Many of the teachers described above had received minimal support or professional development opportunities. There was no incentive or need to do anything differently as they were on permanent contracts. Their choices were not acts of resistance against the reforms; rather, they were made intuitively because they believed, in their heart of hearts, that they were acting in the best interests of the children. However, these deep-seated beliefs and structural gaps

contributed to patterns of learner disengagement during lessons, perpetuating a cycle of failed reforms and underperformance (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017).

In contrast, this cycle seems to fracture when teachers adopt the *abhibhawak* teaching style. By focusing on relationships and learners' well-being, teachers create an environment where students feel valued and safe. This sense of security seems to encourage students to participate, question, and engage more actively with the content taught in class. Lessons become more dialogic, allowing learners to reason, analyse, and evaluate rather than memorise. The positive response then appears to validate teachers to try new techniques. As engagement increases, disruptive behaviour appears to further decline, reducing the need for punitive measures and fostering trust between teachers and learners.

What stood out was that all five teachers who used this teaching style were on temporary contracts and were deeply reflective of their own learning experiences growing up. They recalled that the teachers who had the most influence on them were the ones who invested in them and built a relationship, while they shared how little they learnt from teachers who were strict and focused only on memorising the textbooks. As a result, these teachers deliberately chose to ensure that they shared a relationship like they would with their own children.

They believed respect must be earned, and that when someone genuinely fulfils their role (*dharma*), it is acknowledged. Thus, they didn't seek validation based on learners' compliance or results. This appeared to disrupt the traditional learning cycle, paving the way for new cycles that aimed more at achieving learner-centred education, possibly a form of 'contextual LCE'.

These shifts are described metaphorically, bringing learners closer to *moksha* or *nirvana*. However, it must be noted that the focus remained on delivering lessons driven by the book's content. Perhaps this is a contextual LCE model, but again, my study is too small for me to make these generalisations. Still, there seems to be space here that needs further exploration to work towards learning-centred education (Lattimer, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2004).

These pedagogical practices occur within a complex backdrop of constant political instability and ongoing state restructuring (as discussed in detail in

Chapter 2). Under such conditions, there is no active mechanism to monitor or provide teachers with feedback, despite policy promises. As a result, teachers are left to interpret and implement reforms on their own, relying on personal histories and cultural norms rather than on systemic support (Sakata et al., 2022). This absence of accountability and professional development further sustains the karmic cycle of partial implementation of reforms.

Cultural foundations of karmic cycles: Indigenous knowledge and policy implications

This section discusses how indigenous and local knowledge systems provide a cultural foundation for contextualising learner-centred education in Nepal. The findings show how teacher conceptions and pedagogical practices, expressed through *guru* and *abhibhawak* teaching styles, are deeply embedded in cultural epistemologies and worldviews rather than shaped by policy prescriptions. These styles resonate with Hindu and Buddhist philosophies that historically shaped education in Nepal, emphasising moral responsibility, authority, and care (Baindur, 2021; Hyland, 2013; Lipner, 2012) (see *Chapter 2*).

Concepts such as *dharma* (ethical duty), *karma* (consequences of actions, fate), and *moksha*/*nirvana* (liberation) underpin the *guru* ideal. At the same time, the *abhibhawak* style reflects parental responsibility and collective well-being, yet is also embedded in the same cultural beliefs and worldviews, albeit in different manifestations (Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021). Dialogic practices observed in classrooms also reflect traditions of questioning and reflection found in both Hindu and Buddhist texts (Baindur, 2021; Sharma, 2013).

This exists within a Nepali cultural landscape characterised by diverse understandings of knowledge and worldview, given the country's diversity. However, despite this diversity, the Nepali education system continues to legitimise only specific forms of knowledge and worldviews of the dominant *Bahun-chhetri* caste/ethnicity (Bennett, 2008; Parajuli and Onta, 2021; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2012). This structural inequality and the pursuit of *bikas* (development) through education (Bista, 1991; Pigg, 1992, 1996) have almost become a broader nexus within which pedagogical practices are nestled. These cultural foundations deepen our understanding of why teachers prioritise authority and care over policy directives. *Guru*-style teachers gain legitimacy

from norms that position them as intellectually and morally superior to students (Sharma, 2013), reinforcing hierarchical structures. Conversely, *abhibhawak*-style teachers focus on relational care, aligning with cultural expectations of parental responsibility (Sarangapani, 2003c; Sarangapani and Sharma, 2021).

Both styles demonstrate how pedagogy is shaped within a cultural context, either perpetuating karmic cycles that lead to compliance driven by fear or fostering trust and relationships (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). Within this context, LCE reforms often seem like external impositions that do not sufficiently engage with indigenous knowledge systems and contextual realities (Schweisfurth, 2025a; Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). This adds further evidence to the existing discourse on why policies such as LCE struggle to effect substantial change (Bremner et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2011).

Policies and their influences on teaching-learning influences

Teachers do not adopt prescribed methods simply because they appear in policy documents. Instead, their pedagogical choices are informed by personal histories, cultural expectations, and systemic pressures (Steiner-Khamsi, 2025; Tabulawa, 2013; Vavrus, 2021). Indirect or accidental effects of policy appear more influential than the intended outcomes of reforms (Carney and Bista, 2009). Incentive structures, such as passing teaching exams to secure permanent contracts, seem to exert far greater influence on practice than policy ideals and mandates. Similarly, the emphasis on producing tangible outputs as markers of success continues to drive and reinforce the importance placed on high-stakes examinations. This, in turn, dominates classroom activities, which remain content-driven and textbook-centred.

The study identified two teaching styles, the *guru* and the *abhibhawak* approach, which coexist on a spectrum. Both styles are deeply rooted in Nepal's cultural context and are influenced more by societal norms than by specific policy directives that guide the school education system. SESP (2022/23-2032/33) continues to reflect the global policy rhetoric (Schweisfurth, 2013), emphasising enhancing quality and relevance by making school education more inclusive, equitable, and accessible (MoEST, 2022). This entails shifting from a passive, teacher-centred model to a learner-centred approach, where students actively co-construct knowledge in a supportive, fear-free environment, with

continuous monitoring and assessment of their progress (MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022). However, Chapters *8* to *11* demonstrated that the teaching-learning experiences were not merely acts of resistance to policy mandates but were reinterpreted and manifested through existing cultural logics of learning, hierarchy, and structural and material realities.

Ironically, this entire reform is undertaken for the children so they can access better-quality education and ultimately contribute to the country's growth (MoEST, 2022). Yet they seem to have little space, even though the study demonstrated how pedagogical practices are actively shaped and negotiated by the learners as well. Instead, children are abstracted and universalised (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b). This then results in policy appearing as a weak, almost flimsy plaster, attempting to hold the system together in alignment with donor expectations and global goals. This metaphor reflects the superficiality of reforms that aim to transform classroom practices without engaging with the contextual realities and cultural contexts that underpin them. Teachers' narratives confirm that these policies do not significantly influence their day-to-day practices. Instead, they are perceived as distant, abstract, and disconnected from lived realities.

This disconnect perpetuates the karmic cycle of reform: policies circulate with promises of transformation, yet classroom practices remain unchanged because reforms fail to address the lived contexts and cultural discourses that shape and influence them. Until policies move beyond technical prescriptions and engage with these cultural logics, they will continue to function as flimsy plasters, covering cracks without addressing the underlying structural issues. In this sense, 'culture' is not outside people but enacted through teachers' legitimacy work and learners' negotiations (Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024). This is why reforms aimed at shifting teacher practices to learner-centred ones have failed to bring about meaningful transformations in the teaching-learning process.

Reflection on the discussion

This discussion demonstrates that pedagogical practices in Nepali classrooms are deeply relational and culturally embedded, challenging assumptions that LCE can be implemented through quick policy fixes. To address the research questions, this chapter examines the main themes from the Findings, which explored

teachers' and learners' everyday teaching-learning experiences and perceptions, as well as pedagogical practices within the Nepali LCE reform context. Overall, these analyses illustrate how teachers and students participate in, perceive, and collaboratively shape the teaching and learning processes. They highlight common pedagogical methods used in Nepali classrooms and demonstrate how these practices are influenced by the beliefs and experiences of both teachers and learners.

The chapter illustrates how teachers' and learners' everyday engagement, shaped by their beliefs and experiences, influences pedagogical practices in Nepali basic schools. These practices are negotiated through relationships between students and teachers, who are deeply rooted in their cultural and structural contexts. This demonstrates that pedagogical practices mirror the epistemological and ontological beliefs of both teachers and learners. It also reiterates that teaching is not just an act but a discourse (Alexander, 2000).

In this light, two teaching styles emerged from the findings: the *guru* and the *abhibhawak* teaching styles that reflect the deeply embedded cultural discourses that shape and influence learning and what is considered knowledge. These two styles existed on a spectrum and created overlapping karmic cycles of teaching and learning that are constantly renegotiated and regenerated through interaction with the learners; they are not static. Such cycles highlight how reform trajectories are iterative and relational rather than linear (Altinyelken and Sözeri, 2019; Verger et al., 2018a). These cycles add further evidence to existing literature that reforms cannot simply be imposed (Khamsi-Steiner, 2016); they are reinterpreted in everyday practice (Guthrie et al., 2015; Steiner-Khamsi, 2013).

These teaching styles are influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions but are also intertwined with the structural inequalities in Nepal, where the dominant *Bahun-chhettri* worldview has been legitimised over others (Bista, 1991; Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). Consequently, policies and laws that mandate specific behavioural changes, such as moving away from corporal punishment (Government of Nepal, 2018), introducing CAS (MoE, 2009, 2016), or ensuring inclusive learning environments where children from all social and economic backgrounds are treated fairly and without discrimination (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; MoE, 2009, 2016; MoEST, 2022), do not appear to influence practices

significantly. Instead, the structural realities of values and the reinforcement of high-stakes examinations and teacher contracts have a greater impact on pedagogical practices (Carney and Bista, 2009). So these policies serve as a flimsy plaster that covers cracks without addressing structural and relational realities.

A key part of the research and discussion was highlighting how children are at the centre of pedagogical practice, negotiating and shaping the teaching-learning process alongside the teachers (Sakata, 2023). Despite power imbalances and structural inequalities, the discussion showed that children are not passive recipients. Within these structures and inequalities, they actively influence classroom realities and navigate learning experiences through resistance, peer learning, and negotiations, challenging deficit views of learners (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b). Ignoring these dynamics oversimplifies the complexity of pedagogical practices and what teaching and learning entail in Nepali classrooms. As discussed throughout the thesis, children tend to be 'universalised' and removed from their contexts when addressed in Nepali policies (CDC, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; MoEST, 2022). However, they are also underrepresented in existing global discourses on LCE implementation. Their experiences matter and, therefore, perhaps the Minimum Standards (Schweisfurth, 2013) should also be expanded to incorporate the experiences of children engaging with LCE reforms.

Subsequently, breaking the cycle of incomplete reform implementation moves beyond merely directing and executing quick-fix grand policy visions. It involves a more comprehensive study of complex contextual epistemologies and cultural realities (Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024), considering them without dismissing their importance. Incorporating indigenous and local knowledge into pedagogical practices, supported by the onto-cultural perspective (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) and the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019), offers a way to reimagine contextualised, LCE (Lattimer, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2004). This does not mean blindly accepting all practices rooted in local contexts as legitimate, nor entirely rejecting global reforms. Instead, it involves engaging in critical dialogue about how learning is experienced and perceived. Such dialogue should genuinely consider values of relationality, moral responsibility, and local epistemologies. Hopefully, this will initiate a

conversation and help forge a way forward to break the repetitive cycle of reform and failed implementation, creating space for meaningful, relevant change in classrooms.

Chapter 13. Conclusion

The thesis sought to understand and document how teachers and learners engage in, interpret, and experience teaching-learning processes in Nepali basic schools. This understanding of what happens in the classroom is lacking amid successive educational reforms and policy discourses that promote Learner-Centred Education (LCE). There is a need to move beyond surface-level accounts to examining the embedded structural and cultural logics that inform and reinforce these classroom practices.

The most relevant space for uncovering these complex interactions between structural and cultural logics is the classroom and everyday pedagogical practices. This study illustrates how teaching and learning take place in three basic schools in Kathmandu, Kapilvastu, and Baglung. While being embedded in these three schools, I used a Comparative Case Study (CCS) (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b) research design drawing on ethnographically informed approaches to closely examine and understand the daily teaching-learning processes and how they are experienced. I employed multiple methods to generate data with teachers and children. This approach also enabled an examination of how policy reforms interact with contextual realities and how cultural beliefs shape pedagogical practices over time. It explored how teachers and students together shape and navigate everyday teaching and learning processes. It also demonstrated how teachers' positioning in terms of what they consider learning to be and what a teacher should be like shapes pedagogical practices and, in turn, how students engage and respond to it.

Summary of Findings

The study revealed that everyday pedagogical practices in Nepali basic classrooms are shaped by cultural assumptions, relational dynamics, and structural pressures rather than by reform ideals that promote LCE. Teachers' and children's identities and lived realities were central in shaping everyday pedagogical practices. These practices remained relatively stable across schools despite differing contextual realities. Material shortages and infrastructural constraints formed an underlayer on which teaching and learning were experienced and negotiated.

Furthermore, policies themselves stood in disjuncture. On the one hand, they actively promoted LCE in classrooms. On the other hand, documents such as the national curriculum were highly prescriptive. This left little autonomy for teachers or students to shape their learning experiences. All this inevitably perpetuated the karmic cycle of incomplete grand policy ideals aimed at transforming educational systems. Taken together, these findings provide the basis for addressing the study's main research question and its two sub-questions, which I now discuss in turn.

Research questions

The study was guided by the main research question (1) and was qualified by two sub-questions (a) and (b). I will answer these questions drawing on the Findings and Discussion chapters.

1. How do teachers and learners engage in and experience teaching-learning processes in Nepali basic schools?

Overall, the study found that teachers and learners engaged in teaching–learning through shared, culturally embedded routines that were strongly shaped by textbook-driven instruction, examination pressures, and negotiated relational dynamics, rather than by the learner-centred ideals promoted in policy discourses. The three schools appeared similar on the surface, sharing common practices, classroom layouts, and general school routines (Alexander, 2008b), as well as a need to prove their legitimacy. The schools were all anchored in the structural realities of textbook-driven teaching and learning and exam-based assessment. The teaching and learning were based on existing beliefs of what was deemed as 'proper learning' and indicators of success (Guthrie, 2017; Tabulawa, 2013).

Policy documents such as the SESP (2022/23-2032/33) emphasise the importance of ensuring that learners are engaged and motivated to learn by addressing the learners' needs and interests (MoEST, 2022). These policy ideals loosely align with the Minimum Standards (MS) (Schweisfurth, 2013), which is why these were used as an organising principle for presenting the findings.

Although the teachers drove these pedagogical practices, the learners were not passive recipients. They were highly aware of what was happening around them, not only in the classroom but also in their broader contexts.

a. What prevalent pedagogical practices and patterns can be observed in Nepali classrooms/schools?

The study found that a set of prevalent practices consistently shaped classroom interactions and teaching-learning processes across the three schools. These practices reflected shared beliefs, structural pressures, and relational expectations. They were more influential than reform ideals alone. The study, by identifying the most prevalent pedagogical practices, sought to understand how they translated in classrooms to further learning. This is particularly important in contexts where teachers have often been subjected to deficit narratives (Sayed et al., 2021; Tao, 2016). Teachers are often blamed for being underqualified, undertrained, or simply inflexible (Ham and Dekkers, 2019; Parajuli, 2021b).

The framing through the *palette of practices* (Barrett, 2007) positioned the fluidity of these prevalent teaching approaches and their frequent overlap. Drawing on this framing, the findings revealed a set of prevalent pedagogical practices that consistently appeared across the three schools. These practices included: (1) Use of lecturing and reading the chapter together; (2) use of questioning and repetition; (3) assigning homework; (4) ways of managing classrooms; and (5) use of assessments. This palette of practices manifested differently across lessons and between teachers.

Teaching and learning were centred around the textbook across all three schools. It is also important to note that most of the teaching-learning took place with the class together and not as individualised tasks. The boundary between ‘practice’ and ‘belief’ was not visible in everyday teaching. Pedagogical routines expressed how teachers understood their roles, responsibilities, and relationships with students (Alexander, 2000) as most clearly reflected in their positioning along the *guru-abhibhawak* spectrum.

While not frequently observed, dialogic moments did emerge in some lessons, aligning more closely with the *abhibhawak* style. These moments emerged organically and contextually, rather than being driven by LCE policy mandates. They took the form of classroom conversations in which teachers and learners were engaged in what could be understood as active learning and co-construction of knowledge (Alexander, 2018). Such exchanges were facilitated through relational processes grounded in feeling at ease in each other’s

presence. This was also evident when students used one another as learning resources. While the study's scale limits generalisability, these moments point to the need for further research on how peers can engage and motivate one another in learning.

Finally, these practices rarely occurred in isolation. A lesson often blended reading aloud, questioning, repetition, and informal assessment, all held together by the teacher's management style and the class's shared understanding of what counted as 'good behaviour' and 'good learning'. Students and teachers moved through these routines with little need for explicit instruction, showing how pedagogical practice and belief were intertwined in the everyday fabric of classroom life. These patterns reflect the pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) that sustained these practices, often invisible shared experiences.

b. How are these shaped by teachers' and learners' beliefs?

Organising the palette of practices using MS (Schweisfurth, 2013) 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7 enabled the integration of the underlying cultural logics and beliefs (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) to further understand the teaching-learning processes. This framing aligned with the priorities set out in the national policy documents, including the SESP (2022/23–2032/33). Across all three schools, the shared belief that life lessons are learnt through experience and that schooling is a pathway to further opportunities, such as employment and social and economic stability, has inevitably shaped how teaching and learning is understood and experienced.

The palette of practices discussed above was intertwined with teachers' cultural logics, experiences, and beliefs about what constituted learning, respect, engagement, assessments, indicators of learning, and self-worth. Teachers' positioning along the *guru–abhibhawak* spectrum shaped expectations and practices about what these were. These positionings were a product of the entanglement in the complex contexts in which they were embedded (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2013b), including their past experiences as students themselves (Anderson, 2023). They also faced ongoing challenges related to resource constraints. The demands of teaching compounded these difficulties (Sakata et al., 2022). Their legitimacy was often questioned, and they were painted through deficit narratives (Sayed and Pesambili, 2026). Additionally, they navigated unstable, recurring reforms that demanded a paradigm shift and often

overlooked their individuality. Therefore, the routines that emerged from the palette of practices were co-produced by these underlying beliefs.

Part of teachers' identity involved the cultural belief that they were responsible for shaping students' character and were perceived as wise, almost like sages (Sharma, 2013). This belief granted them legitimacy to use measures such as "teaching children life lessons", "fixing" students, or "caring for them" as if they were family (Lipner, 2012). Children distinguished between just punishment and lashing out. However, it is important not to essentialise cultural practices.

Despite teachers' claims of a moral duty to use "whatever means necessary" to teach children right from wrong, children clearly understood that legitimate authority derived from the relationship and trust they shared with them, not merely from being teachers (Harber, 2015b; Hargreaves, 2017). This illustrates how, within unequal power dynamics, children were still able to negotiate what they deemed as legitimate authority. They often attributed such behaviour to teachers' personal challenges, including their own frustration. This shows that children are rooted in their contexts, which shape their opinions and perceptions (Sriprakash and Hopkins, 2016).

At the same time, legitimate authority was attributed to teachers who cared for and valued the children (Hargreaves, 2017). It was also associated with dependability and reliability. These teachers were 'respected from within'. Children were aware of the teachers' circumstances. These forms of interpretation and adjustment reflect the understanding of children as active co-participants who co-construct meaning within everyday cultural practices (Brown, 2022).

Learning in schools was associated with tangible outputs. The responses in the lessons were deemed as engagement when the questions were answered correctly. This reflected the prescriptive nature of the national curriculum, showing possible shared beliefs between teachers and policymakers about what counted as learning. This reveals an existing pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) underpinned by onto-cultural logics that reinforced this practice (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). Variation was evident among teachers in their expectations regarding how these responses would be received in the classroom.

When teachers created space for learning by making students feel accepted and free, students were more actively engaged in the learning process. They took ownership and did "not want to disappoint" teachers who cared for them. This dynamic reflected the parent–child relationship. Lessons were still centred on the textbooks, but the sense of ease enabled learners to share their opinions, be encouraged to continue trying, and avoid despair. The relational dynamics may have generated contextually appropriate pedagogical practices in which children and teachers shared a relationship that reflected LCE policy expectations but did not derive from the policy discourse itself. Rather, it emerged from teachers' personal reflections and their engagements with learners about what was deemed appropriate at a given moment.

Written assessments served as a foundation for many of these pedagogical practices. Many students also associated good marks with future opportunities and family expectations, reinforcing their own belief that accuracy and performance were essential parts of learning. This belief shaped how they approached classroom tasks, especially in relation to assessment and correctness. Policies that promoted CAS stood in disjuncture with the existing system, as they contradicted shared beliefs and values that deemed high-stakes examinations of great importance.

The discussion demonstrated how pedagogical practices reflect the complex interplay of acts and discourses, something that travelling policies such as LCE do not envision (Alexander, 2000; Carney and Bista, 2009). These practices were shaped and negotiated by both teachers and learners. Teachers' and students' beliefs about what constituted learning, authority, care, dependability, legitimacy, and success created patterns of practice that were both stable and continually interpreted in the moment (Brinkmann, 2019; Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). Teachers' and students' beliefs and experiences sustained and reinforced these practices. The result was not linear; rather, it was a mutually reinforcing pattern in which beliefs were enacted as practices and practices affirmed beliefs. All of this interacted with complex contextual and structural realities, giving rise to culturally grounded pedagogical practices grounded in relationality (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). This may help explain the persistence of practices and how LCE reforms are reinterpreted through cultural logics.

Implications of the study: Conceptual/theoretical/methodological

Reframing Nepali classrooms

To start to understand the 'black box' of what transpires inside Nepali classrooms, the study positioned children as central actors along with teachers. All reforms are implemented in the interests of the children, yet they continue to be represented as passive, universalised, abstracted entities (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2016b). The study, through its embeddedness, illustrates that children in these classrooms are not passive recipients of instruction but are highly aware and sensitive to their contextual realities. Subsequently, they co-shape the learning environment by interpreting the teachers' behaviours and intentions, resisting, adapting, and negotiating and co-constructing meanings such as respect and legitimacy within everyday pedagogical practices.

By conceptualising learners as active co-participants embedded in cultural and structural realities, the study challenges deficit narratives about children. It reframes Nepali classrooms as spaces where pedagogical practices are dynamically co-produced. These practices are not solely teacher-driven or dictated by policy. This positions children's agency, perspectives, and lived experiences at the centre of understanding how pedagogical routines persist, shift, or are reinterpreted over time as argued by Lundy (2007) .

The study also challenges deficit portrayals of Nepali teachers that hold them responsible for all failures in the education system. Instead, it presents them as complex, situated actors whose practices are shaped by cultural positioning, structural pressures, and their own moral and professional identities (Brinkmann, 2019; Pesambili et al., 2022; Schweisfurth, 2025b). Teachers' placement along the *guru–abhibhawak* spectrum illustrates that pedagogical decisions were rooted in beliefs about authority, care, responsibility, and legitimate ways of shaping students. It is a culturally grounded spectrum that analyses pedagogical practices as relational and shaped by cultural assumptions, rather than as isolated practices.

This positioning helps us understand how the persistence of certain pedagogical practices and teachers' identities interact with systemic contradictions and resource constraints (Sakata et al., 2022), reinforcing a wider karmic cycle of incomplete reform. Written exams, prescriptive curricula, material shortages,

and policy disjuncture anchor and sustain the existing pedagogical nexus (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). I hope this study's insights help shift the focus back inside the classroom. It further highlights the need to reframe and reimagine pedagogical practices through relational, cultural, and structural logics, specifically in the Nepali context. This is because these logics are embedded in everyday practices and cannot be readily and instantly switched from teacher-centred to learner-centred (Brinkmann, 2019; Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017).

Implications for theoretical and conceptual frameworks

Theoretically, the study provides further evidence for the need to examine culturally grounded pedagogical practices. It does so by applying both the pedagogical nexus and onto-cultural perspectives. It illustrates how similar 'colours' from the same palette result in completely different canvases that are grounded in structural, cultural and personal realities (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). The use of the karmic cycle metaphor offers a Nepali extension and application of the understanding of how the pedagogical nexus is sustained through onto-cultural perspectives.

The use of MS1, 2, 4, 6, and 7 (Schweisfurth, 2013) as an organising framework helped to examine not only existing practices but also the cultural and relational beliefs underpinning them. Although the MS aligns closely with national policy rhetoric, I propose expanding the framework by incorporating children's experiences to gain a more holistic understanding of classroom practices.

We could potentially include an additional MS8 that specifically explores how children experience teaching and learning in the classroom. This would encompass broad criteria regarding how they perceive engaging and motivating lessons, mutual respect, and how they view and experience assessment and learning development. The study contributes to the existing discourse on how ideas such as mutual respect, engagement, and motivation need to be understood in their contexts (Brown and Schweisfurth, 2024). Here, children's perspectives are central to how these notions are negotiated and enacted. In this way, when exploring culturally grounded pedagogy, children's voices serve as indicators of these standards rather than using external metrics of what we deem to be respect or engagement.

Methodological implications

Methodologically, the children were at the centre of the data generation processes. The aim was to make children's interpretations, voices, and everyday engagements visible within classroom life as stated by Lundy (2007). The embedded CCS research design (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a) enabled close observation of how children interpreted and navigated teachers' behaviours, adapted to expectations, resisted or complied with routines, and co-constructed meanings within pedagogical practices. This highlighted their agency (limited) in real time. The students' proactivity in collaborating with me brought out essential yet evolving logics of what was deemed legitimate authority (Hargreaves, 2017), what constituted respect, and what was deemed just or unfair. Their experiences showed how seemingly neutral assumptions about equality and justice are interpreted and experienced in context. These insights enriched the understanding of pedagogical practices in ways that teachers' or policy perspectives cannot. Their contributions ensured that their experiences were accounted for by themselves rather than being extracted. They were grounded in the specific relational and cultural contexts of each school.

The prolonged embeddedness across the three schools enabled the capture of the everyday realities of the participating teachers. This ethnographic nature of fieldwork reinforced teachers as multidimensional, situated individuals navigating complex cultural, relational, and structural pressures. It enabled me to document the interpretive and emotional labour involved in teachers' decisions, as well as the subtle ways learners adjusted to expectations, resisted, or sought validation (Vavrus, 2021). The study also demonstrates the value of using comparative axes flexibly within a CCS framework (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b). The three comparative axes enabled a comparison of cultural and relational dynamics observed across the three schools in evolving contextual and cultural scapes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017a, 2017b). This allowed teacher positioning, children's perspectives, and contextual routines to guide the comparative process.

However, it is also important to reflect on some of the limitations of CCS as a research design. Specifically, the comparisons across the axes helped identify a pattern of practices that could be traced across the two teaching styles. The pattern of practices was inherited over time but was also negotiated,

readjusted, and reshaped through present interactions with learners, as well as structural influences. This inherited component is partially addressed in the argument that Bartlett and Vavrus put forth as to why context is essential in helping understand pedagogical practices. However, this challenges the implicit conception of temporality as being linear, something that was not seen in the Nepali epistemology. The illustration is through the understanding of the karmic cycle, of how nothing starts from ground zero but rather the action (*kriya)* and its *samskara (*imprint) and *phala (fruit)* become the inherited space where new interaction takes place.

The horizontal, vertical, and especially the transversal axes, to an extent, work on assumptions of practices progressing linearly, even though they are influenced by contexts, values, and beliefs. The study, on the other hand, by demonstrating the persistence and recurrence of practices across the teaching style, demonstrated how pedagogical practices contain incomplete manifestations of policy implementation and how they are translated into practice and perceived by both teachers and learners. This is particularly important as it comes back to the importance of understanding how practices are manifestations over time that have their own cycles and layers that form the *sanchita karma (*the stored past*)* that inform the current practices *(prarabdha karma)*. Therefore, it may be important to reflect further upon ways to encompass different notions of temporality across cultures and create more space to explore how the different axes to manifest in different research settings.

Finally, the study contributes to the ongoing debate about researching non-Western contexts. It raises questions about how culturally bounded issues such as consent, trust, and ethical standards are (Robinson-Pant, 2005; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2018). It also highlighted the blurred lines and messiness of navigating fieldwork (Naveed et al., 2017). The messiness was also shaped by the fluidity of my positionality (Barnes, 2023), as a Nepali researcher working within familiar cultural landscapes while still being perceived as an external PhD researcher. These two positions added an additional layer to how interactions unfolded in relationally embedded environments. They also highlight the need to further engage in discourse around ethics and positionality of doctoral students researching across cultures in Comparative and International Education (CIE)

(Robinson-Pant, 2005). This is especially important when research takes place within relationally and culturally embedded environments (Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013).

Implications for policy and CIE

Implications for the Nepali policy landscape

The findings that have emerged in this study for a Nepali reader or policymaker will not be new or groundbreaking. The practices and issues discussed in the findings are already present in the everyday discourse of what is wrong with the Nepali school education system. This is either because these stories are reflected in our personal experiences or because we have heard anecdotes that convey these realities.

Even when these realities feel familiar, the issue of persistent disconnect between policy and practice remains. The successive policies, in prioritising 'fixing' the education system, end up somehow undermining the cultural and contextual realities that shape everyday pedagogical practice. This narrative positions teachers and children as lacking and in need of correction (Tabulawa, 2003). I am not denying that the system is broken. The structural inequalities and disparities are evident, and power imbalances between students and teachers are undeniable (Phyak, 2021b; Pradhan, 2020b; Shields and Rappleye, 2008a). Children are also not learning, at least not as much as they should be (Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Nepal, 2019; UNICEF Nepal, 2018). However, the continued implementation of successive reforms will continue to propagate the persistence of the karmic cycle of failed reforms.

Therefore, this study highlights the importance of recognising that pedagogical practices do not operate in isolation (Alexander, 2015; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). To address issues in the school system, there is an urgent need to understand what Nepali society and communities value in learning and how indicators of success are translated across generations and communities. The disjuncture between practice and LCE policy mandates is not merely a case of teachers' rejection or resistance to change. Rather, there appears to be an implicit shared belief among policymakers and teachers that contradicts LCE principles regarding what classroom teaching and learning should look like.

Another area highlighted in this study is the need to re-evaluate what policymakers expect of teachers. The study highlights the myriad contradictions that many of the participating teachers navigated daily. This included the need to prove their legitimacy to local authorities and communities by ensuring students scored well in written exams, or having to look after a child whose father had beaten them up severely. In a context where relationships define the nature of interaction, where does one draw the boundaries? This study highlights the need for policymakers to reflect more deeply on the implications of ideas around mutual respect, a fear-free environment, and the safeguarding of children's rights in relation to existing cultural beliefs and values.

The findings illustrate that children are not passive recipients of reforms such as LCE. Instead, they actively define, reinforce, resist, and challenge the teaching-learning processes. These actions occur in ways that policy narratives rarely acknowledge. Policy rhetoric often frames children as individuals who must be 'instilled' with values of democracy, equity, justice, and 'appropriate' behaviour (MoEST, 2022). However, these assumptions overlook the interpretive awareness children already possess.

The study highlights the need for policymakers to reconsider universalised, abstract notions of 'the child' as argued by Hopkins and Sriprakash in their book(2016a). They need to recognise children's situated understandings of their social contexts. Paying attention to children's perspectives may enable more contextually appropriate interventions. Children respond to and navigate pedagogical practices in ways that reflect their lived realities.

Implications for CIE

This study offers further empirical evidence on the importance of moving beyond framing education as solely either LCE or TCE (Barrett, 2007; Lattimer, 2015; Schweisfurth, 2013). The findings of the study align with existing research showing that travelling policies, such as LCE, are reinterpreted and shaped by contextual, structural, and cultural factors (Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019). They reveal persistent mismatches and contradictions between policy intentions and real-life experiences (Tabulawa, 2003).

Similar patterns have also emerged across contexts and time periods, as in Jessop and Penny's (1998) study in Gambia and South Africa and Barrett's (2008)

study in Tanzania. These studies show how teacher identity is continually influenced and negotiated by beliefs, values, experiences, and local conditions. These parallels help situate the Nepali findings within broader CIE debates about the contextual reinterpretation of global travelling policies such as LCE. They also extend these debates by demonstrating how pedagogical practices are driven and shaped by everyday relational practices between teachers and children in Nepali classrooms.

However, a notable gap remains in these studies and within the wider CIE field regarding children's experiences with policies like such as LCE implementation (Brown, 2025; Sakata, 2023). By highlighting children as active agents in shaping pedagogical practices, I hope this research adds to the limited existing literature on children's experiences with LCE reforms and their implementation.

Limitations of the study

In conducting a comparative study, even though I was embedded in the schools for longer periods, the findings reflect only the tip of the iceberg. My study does not include broader community members, principals, local authorities, or policymakers. As such, it represents the granular, everyday teaching–learning processes experienced by teachers and students within schools, rather than broader institutional or policy-level perspectives.

Additionally, the data represent only the period of my presence in the schools. Data generation was influenced by exam routines, the end-of-year period, and winter breaks. Consequently, the everyday rhythms of school life during my fieldwork were shaped by these 'events', which may have shaped the kind of pedagogical practices that were observed. As with most ethnographic research, my presence inevitably formed part of the relational context being studied (Alexander, 2000). This was not treated as a limitation, but as an integral feature of ethnographic engagement in relationally embedded school settings. My interactions with teachers and children remained within school norms and ethical protocols.

The study also reflects the perspective of a sole researcher and interpretations are therefore necessarily situated. As a Nepali researcher working within familiar cultural landscapes while also being positioned as an external PhD researcher, I had to constantly navigate my positionality across contexts and

relationships. These navigations shaped access, rapport, and interpretation, and formed part of the relational dynamics through which pedagogical practices were observed and understood.

Working with the children, I was granted permission by all three schools to engage with entire groups of students across different grades. This meant that most of my 'focused interactions' were with larger groups, limiting opportunities to engage in sustained one-to-one conversations unless children approached me directly. It also meant that certain opinions that did not 'fit the trend' may not have been openly shared, a phenomenon I can only speculate about. It is also important to note that my presence could have influenced how the children engaged with teaching-learning experiences, just as it did for teachers. My research was therefore limited to children's school-based experiences and did not capture how their learning and beliefs may be shaped beyond school spaces.

Nonetheless, I still believe the study is valuable, as it offers in-depth glimpses of what happens in the 'black box' of classrooms. The study contributes by centring teachers and students as co-constructors of pedagogical practices. These teaching–learning approaches are embedded in a deeply complex cultural, contextual, and structural landscape. It demonstrates how pedagogical practices are not neutral(Alexander, 2008b). Rather, they are influenced by teachers' perceptions of learning, authority, and respect, while students also negotiate these assumptions and are not simply reactive to their teachers' expectations. They actively define what learning, authority, care, and respect come to mean in everyday classroom life.

Future research

What emerged from the ethnographic fieldwork was that pedagogical practices were not static but were continually interpreted, negotiated, and sustained by everyday beliefs and perceptions that drove relational interactions between teachers and children. Therefore, there is a need for longer-duration studies to be conducted, possibly across schools and levels. Such studies will enable further examination of the granular elements of everyday teaching and learning processes. Future research can also investigate teachers' positionings and how the *guru-abhibhawak* spectrum evolves, or does not hold, in other contexts. There is also a need to focus on researching the cultural and belief systems

associated with learning, its nature, and indicators of success. This may deepen understanding of how pedagogical practices are shaped by context, potentially opening avenues for more targeted interventions.

The study showed that children actively influence teaching and learning processes and experiences. Therefore, it is essential to further explore their classroom experiences, perceptions, and beliefs in more detail. Future research could involve children in examining issues such as teacher legitimacy, fairness, and power dynamics between teachers and students. It should also consider what constitutes learning and how these understandings change as children progress through grades, interact with different teachers, or face new assessment challenges. Since the study found that children frequently negotiate pedagogical routines, investigating this negotiation over time would help deepen understanding of their agency within established pedagogical and structural systems.

It is also important to investigate evolving belief systems and how social media, including TikTok and YouTube, shape children's opinions on issues such as children's rights. This becomes particularly relevant in light of the study's observation that children were highly aware of their broader social and cultural contexts, and that these understandings informed how they interpreted classroom practices. There is also scope to study friendships and peer relationships and how these can function as enablers for further learning. While this study could not explore these dynamics in depth, the frequent use of peers as resources within classrooms points to the need for further research into peer-mediated learning and motivation.

Final thoughts and reflections

We are, as a country, again at a crossroads, facing a regime change after recent elections. These elections were triggered by Gen Z protests, which resulted from rising corruption, disparities, unemployment, and other forms of frustration. Nepal has long been in a constant state of flux, whether through frequent regime changes, government changes, or successive reforms. Everything has been done for *bikas* (progress), yet we find ourselves caught in the same patterns repeatedly.

In this moment of national uncertainty, the education sector mirrors the same cycles of promise and disappointment. These patterns make it increasingly clear that reforms cannot succeed through surface-level reform mandates such as LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013, 2025b). The *guru-abhibhawak* spectrum illustrated how relationality drove pedagogical practices, in which notions of respect, authority, legitimacy, learning, and success were culturally negotiated. Therefore, these deeper onto-cultural, contextual lived logics that shape everyday pedagogical practices must be taken seriously (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). Understanding teachers' practices through the relational identities/teaching styles of *guru* and *abhibhawak* provides a Nepali perspective on how authority and care are negotiated in classrooms. This lens helps make sense of the persistence of particular practices, while also pointing to relational openings for different futures: something that policy mandates have ignored.

And yet, returning to the moment I first entered a Nepali classroom searching for answers, the clearest source of hope lies in the very relationships that sustained those spaces. The relationships between teachers and children that fostered acceptance, dignity, laughter, and mutual support catalysed genuine learning despite structural constraints. For reforms to succeed, they must take these relational and interpretive worlds of teachers and children seriously. Only this can help pedagogical practices become truly contextual, relevant, and capable of breaking the karmic cycles that have defined Nepal's educational past. This thesis has shown that any meaningful reform must begin from the lived relational worlds of teachers and children, because it is within these everyday negotiations that Nepal's educational future will be shaped.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide for teachers

Interview Guide for Teachers:

Date:

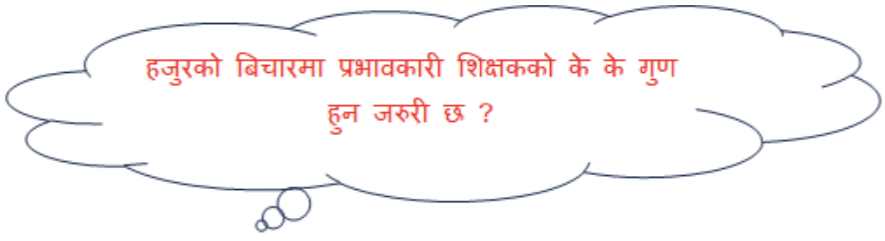
Place:

School:

Name of Interviewee:

- Introduction to the interviewee
- About teaching procedures and style
- Opinions about the curriculum
- The school and the classroom and the overall working environment:
- Aspects about your teaching self:
- Reflections of your own school experiences
- Your experiences working with children.
- How to strengthen the education system.
- What do you consider learning
- What makes you a successful teacher
- If you could change something in the education system, what would you change

हजुरको बिचारहरू हजुरको शब्दमा : बुँदा गत(point wise) टिप्पणी वा हजुरले इच्छा भयो भने यो कुरा कविता वा अरू कुनै सैलीमा नि व्यक्त गर्न सक्नु हुन्छ



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Appendix 2: Observation guide

Observation guide

School : Name of lesson: Teacher: Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

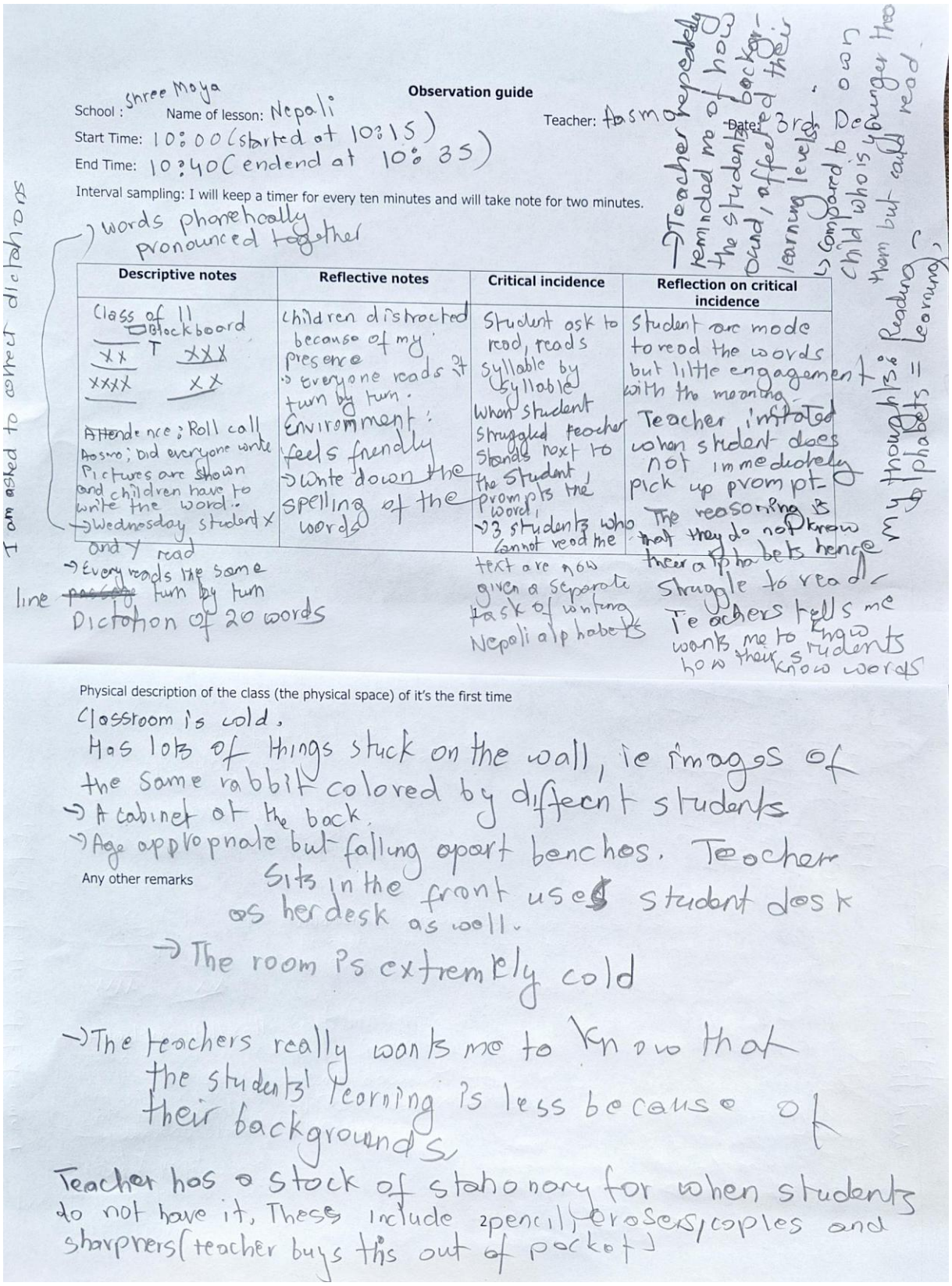
Interval sampling: I will keep a timer for every ten minutes and will take note for two minutes.

Descriptive notes	Reflective notes	Critical incidence	Reflection on critical incidence

Physical description of the class (the physical space) of it's the first time

Any other remarks

Appendix 3: Classroom observations notes



Observation guide

School : Shree Moya Name of lesson: Nepali Teacher: Asmo Date: 3rd

Start Time: 10:00 (started at 10:15)

End Time: 10:40 (endend at 10:35)

Interval sampling: I will keep a timer for every ten minutes and will take note for two minutes.

Descriptive notes	Reflective notes	Critical incidence	Reflection on critical incidence
Class of 11 Blackboard T XX XXX XXXX XX Attendence; Roll call Asmo; did everyone write Pictures are shown and children have to write the word: →Wednesday student X and Y read →Every reads the same line ~~passage~~ turn by turn Dictation of 20 words	children distracted because of my presence → everyone reads it turn by turn. Environment: feels friendly →write down the spelling of the words	Student ask to read, reads syllable by syllable When student struggled teacher stands next to the student prompts the word. →3 students who cannot read the text are now given a separate task of writing Nepali alphabets	student are made to read the words but little engagement with the meaning Teacher instated when student does not immediately pick up prompt- The reasoning is ~~not~~ they do not know the alphabets hence struggle to read. Teachers tells me wants me to know how their students know words

I am asked to correct dictations

→ words phonetically pronounced together

→ Teacher repeatedly reminded me of how the students backgrounds affected their learning levels.

↳ Compared to own child who is younger than them but could read

My thoughts: Reading = phonics = Learning

Physical description of the class (the physical space) of it's the first time

Classroom is cold.

Has lots of things stuck on the wall, ie images of the same rabbit colored by different students

→ A cabinet at the back.

→ Age appropriate but falling apart benches. Teacher Sits in the front uses student desk as her desk as well.

Any other remarks

→ The room is extremely cold

→ The teachers really wants me to know that the students' learning is less because of their backgrounds.

Teacher has a stock of stationary for when students do not have it. These include 2pencil, erasers/caples and sharpners (teacher buys this out of pocket)

Appendix 4: Guides for working with children (Nepali version)

Activity with students (AWS)Topics/prompts discussed with children across schools across grades (Nepali)

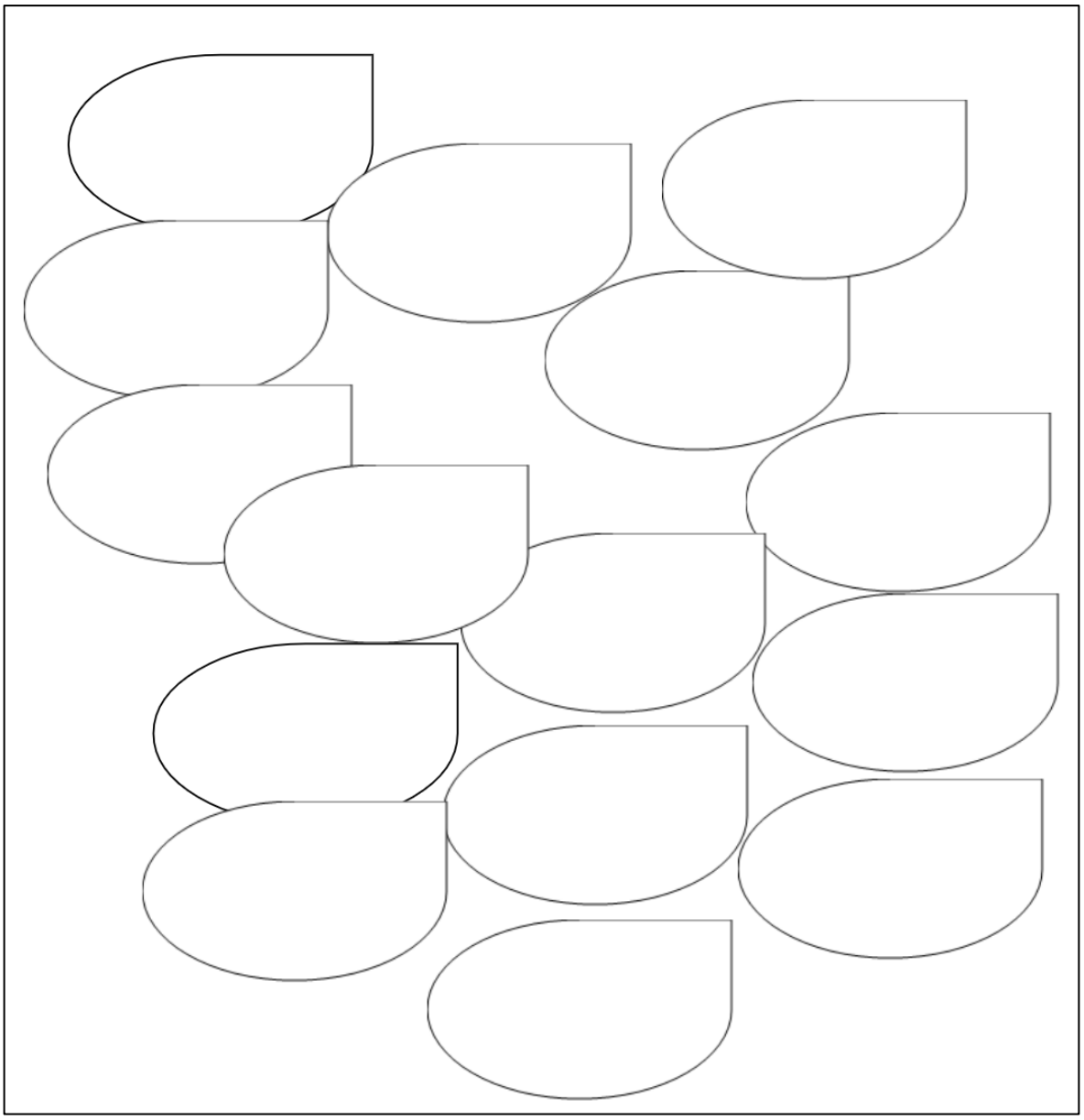
- विद्यालय जाँदा मनमा आउने सोचहरू
- मलाई मनपर्ने शिक्षक, विषय र गतिविधिहरू
- विद्यालयमा नमनपर्ने कुरा
- के–के नयाँ कुरा सिक्न मन लाग्छ
- हामीले सिक्ने कुरा किन सिक्नु पर्छ?
- यदि म प्रधानाध्यापक भएँ भने म के–कस्ता कुरा गर्थें?
- राम्रो विद्यार्थी कस्ता हुन्छन्?
- राम्रो शिक्षक कस्ता हुन्छन्?
- मेरो परिवार र मेरा साथीहरू
- परिवारले मबाट के–कस्ता अपेक्षा राख्छन्
- मेरा सबैभन्दा नजिकका साथीहरू
- ठूला भएपछि म के बन्न चाहन्छु
- मेरो मनपर्ने खाना, कार्यक्रम, मन परेको घुम्ने ठाउँ र जनावरहरू
- यदि म कसै वा केही बन्न पाउँथें भने, म के बन्न चाहन्थें?
- यदि मैले संसार बदल्न पाउने मौका पाएँ भने
- म र मेरो साथी

Poetry was used as a medium of discussion

नटिप्नु हेर कोपिला
नचुँडनु पाप लाग्दछ
नच्यात्नु फुल नानी हो
दया र धर्म भाग्दछ

नछोप्नु है चरी बरी
सराप आँसु लाग्दछ
नमार्नु जन्तु है कुनै
बसेर काल जाग्दछ

Blank boxes were used symbolically for children to fill through thoughts and experiences



Appendix 5: Ethics approval

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

20 October 2023

Dear Pritha Dahal

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Project Title: Exploring a Contextually Relevant Learner-Centred Education Model in Nepali Primary Schools

Application Number: [redacted]

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: [redacted]
- Project end date: [redacted]
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences: [redacted]
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: [redacted]
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The **Request for Amendments to an Approved Application** form should be used: [redacted]

Provided on behalf of: College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
The University of Glasgow
[redacted]

College of Social Sciences
University of Glasgow
Glasgow G12 8QF

Appendix 6: Plain language statement for teachers

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Plain Language Statement (For Teacher Participants)

Title of Project: Exploring Contextually Relevant Learner-Centred Education Models in Nepali Schools
Name of Researcher: Pritha Dahal
Contact Details: [redacted]
Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Michele Schweisfurth and Dr. Paul Lynch
Degree: PhD in Education (School of Education, University of Glasgow)

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for your time and reading this.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

As you know, Nepal's education sector has undergone numerous reforms. A consistent feature is trying to address the quality and structural issue by introducing progressive pedagogies, in essence Learner-Centred Education (LCE). There is a general consensus that LCE reforms have not translated onto practice. There are lots of reasons to why these policies have not translated onto practice, but a missing but crucial aspect is an exploration and documentation of what actually happens inside the classrooms.
Consequently, this study aims to understand why and how you teach the way you do. I will be conducting, interviews, focus group discussions and classroom observations to understand how and why you teach the way you do, to understand your values. Please note that I am not here to pass judgements or evaluate the implementation of reforms. But rather, this is an opportunity for us to collaborate to work towards documenting and understanding real classroom practices and why they are practiced the way they are. We will be reflecting on your experiences of being a teacher, your guiding values, your opinions towards teaching learning and learning experiences. To do so, I will be conducting interviews, focus-group discussions, and classroom observations (proceed only with your consent). The study also seeks to explore the potential to align local teaching-learning practices with broader LCE principles (but it may also not align but will identify local contextual practices).

2. Why have I been chosen?

You are a primary school teacher working in a community school. Since you are a teacher who in essence is working with the implemented LCE reforms on a day-today basis. It

becomes important to get to know your experiences, your beliefs, values, and motivation to how and why you teach the way you do. It also becomes important to understand your opinions and insights on working with children. A total of eight to ten teachers from your school will be participating in this study.

3. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Please note that there will be no repercussions if you decide to withdraw even after agreeing to participate.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to participate in this research, I will ask you to sign a consent form or to state your agreement at the commencement of the audio recorded interview and focus group discussions. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the and research at any time or refuse to answer questions or participate in any of the activities. Please note that if you choose to withdraw at any point of the research, data relating to you will not be processed or included in the study, unless you want them to be.

All recorded interviews will be transcribed by myself. The interviews will be conducted over the eight-to-ten-week period. The interviews will take place at different times and only at your convenience (we can at least five hours of conversations spread across the period). I will also be observing your classes which again will only be done once you are comfortable and consent to proceed further. After, the interviews and observations (at least mid-way through), I will invite you to participate in focus group discussions which will comprise of six to eight participants (your colleagues). Here, we will discuss issues relating to your teaching practices, policies, structural issues. To facilitate the discussion, we will also be using a range of creative methods such as poetry, photo elicitation (where I will bring some pictures related to teaching learning and will ask you to form opinions around it and reflect on your own contexts. I will also ask you to take pictures of what you associate with your teaching life and have you talk about it), or journalling (where you write down your thoughts about your teaching experiences) which to further encourage discussions. Two to three focus group discussions will take place that will last between 45 minutes to an hour. Again, they will take place based on the convenience of the group.

5. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by a pseudonym and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. If at any point, you say something, but you do not want me to include it, I will omit it.

However, please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless disclosure of harm and potential harm is uncovered. In such cases, I may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies. Also, please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed, due to the limited size of the participant and location.

6. What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of research will be used to help complete the researcher's (Pritha Dahal PhD) thesis. The thesis will be completed by 2026.The researcher will organise workshops where the findings of the study will be discussed with the participants (in each school). Additionally,

the findings may be used in journal articles and conference papers. However, no participant will be identified personally in any of the publications or reports. If you are interested to read publications related to the findings. Please contact Pritha Dahal [redacted] r my supervisors, Dr. Michele Schweisfurth [redacted] and Dr. Paul Lynch [redacted]

All data (audio-recordings, transcripts, and pictures) collected over the course of the research will be stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computers. Physical data, paper, photographs will be kept safely in the researcher's locked office cabinet.

All personal data will be deleted upon the completion of writing up of the thesis. The folder containing the personal data will be deleted from all locations in the computer. Personal data on paper will be destroyed through a shredder.

Please note that anonymised/pseudonymised research data will be retained for 10 years in line with the university's guidelines for future research. The data will be stored in the university's OneDrive, in a password protected folder. After, the ten-year period, the data will be permanently deleted from OneDrive.

7. Who is organising and funding the research?

I am doing a PhD at the School of Education, University of Glasgow and is being funded by the College of Social Science.

8. Who has reviewed the study?

The project has been reviewed by the College of Social Science Ethics Committee.

9. Contact for Further Information

If you require further information, please contact any of the following personnel:
Pritha Dahal [redacted] or my supervisors, Dr. Michele Schweisfurth [redacted] and Dr. Paul Lynch [redacted]

If you (participants) have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research project you can contact Lead for Ethical Review, College of Social Sciences, [redacted]

Appendix 7: Plain language statement for children

University of Glasgow | School of Education



Plain Language Statement (For Student Participants)

Title of Project: Exploring Contextually Relevant Learner-Centred Education Models in Nepali Schools
Name of Researcher: Pritha Dahal
Contact Details: [redacted]
Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Michele Schweisfurth and Dr. Paul Lynch
Degree: PhD in Education (School of Education, University of Glasgow)

.....

You are being invited to take part in a research project into understanding how you and your teachers experience coming to school and attending/teaching classes. Research project is a way to learn more about something.

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with Pritha and your parents/carers if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

I hope that this sheet will answer any questions you have about the study. But if you have more, you can always ask me questions.

1. What is the purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to find out how teaching-learning takes place every day in school and how do you feel while learning or being at school. It will also study how your teachers feel about teaching.

2. Why have I been chosen?

You are being asked to take part because I think you will be good at telling me your experiences of learning, what you like, what you don't like, how do you like to learn. I think no one else can tell me as well as you can about how it feels to learn in your school.

3. Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this study, and if you decide not to, you will still take part in the projects we are working on. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know and I will not use any information you have given me in my writing.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part in this project, you and I will be interacting with each other. But I You will be divided into groups, and we will talk and interact with each other and do activities such as drawing, painting, poetry. If you want to, you can have a personal conversation with me. The interaction will take place for about eight to ten weeks at different times (when you

want to). I will also be sitting in your classroom to see what it feels like. In these interactions, we will be talking about your experiences of learning, coming to school, your likes, dislikes, things important to you, anything that you think is related to your learning experiences.

I will record your answers in the group conversations and personal conversations in a voice recorder so that afterwards I carefully listen to what you said and make notes of it.

5. Will the information that I give you in this study be kept confidential?

I will keep the information in a locked cabinet or in a locked file on my computer. When I write about what I have found out and your name will not be mentioned. If you like you can choose another name for me to use when I am writing about what you said. No-one else will know which name you have chosen.

However, please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this. So that you can be protected. Also, please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed, due to the limited size of the participant and location.

6. What will happen to the results of this study

When I have gathered all of the information from everyone who is taking part, I will write about what I have learned in a big piece of writing, which is a long essay I have to complete for the course I am studying on. This will be read and marked by my teachers at university. I will tell you and the other children who have taken part what I have found out about how you like to learn, what you think of school, what your teachers have to say about their teaching. I will destroy all of my notes and recordings when the project is finished.

7. Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and agreed by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow

8. Who can I contact for further Information?

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask me, (Pritha Dahal and my email address is [redacted]

or my supervisors (teachers), Dr. Michele Schweisfurth [redacted] and Dr Paul Lynch [redacted]

or Lead for Ethical Review, College of Social Sciences, [redacted]

Thank you for reading this.

Appendix 8: Consent form teachers

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Consent Form for Teachers

Title of Project: Exploring Contextually Relevant Learner-Centred Education Models in Nepali Schools
Name of Researcher: Pritha Dahal
Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Michele Schweisfurth and Dr. Paul Lynch
Degree: PhD in Education (School of Education, University of Glasgow)

.....

Basic consent clauses

Please tick as appropriate

Yes ☐ No ☐	I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I consent to interviews being audio-recorded
Yes ☐ No ☐	I acknowledge that copies of transcripts will be returned to participants for verification, or I can ask for cross checking of their notes.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I agree that any other data that is generated with me through art, poetry, drama, photographs, the researcher after informing me can use it and take it with them.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I understand I can ask the researcher to omit any part of my conversations or data that I am uncomfortable with it being shared or used in research.

Confidentiality/anonymity clauses

Yes ☐ No ☐	I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I acknowledge that confidentiality may be broken in the event or disclosure of harm or danger to the participants or others.

1

Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee because of the size of the sample and the location of the study.

Where dependent relationship exists

Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that there will be no effect on the grades of my students arising from the participation or non-participation in this research.

Clauses relating to data usage and storage

I agree that:

Yes ☐ No ☐ All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.

Yes ☐ No ☐ The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times. The digital data will be kept securely in password protected filed on the researchers' university computer and OneDrive. While the physical data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office.

Yes ☐ No ☐ The de-identified/anonymised data will be retained securely in a password protected folder in the University's OneDrvie for up to ten years after the completion of the project and will be deleted after, in line with the data guidelines.

Yes ☐ No ☐ Personal data collected during the research will be destroyed upon the completion of the writing up of the PhD.

Yes ☐ No ☐ The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Yes ☐ No ☐ I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant …… Signature or any symbol they want to use ……

Date ……

Name of Researcher ……Signature ……

Date ……

2

Appendix 9: Consent form children

University of Glasgow | School of Education

Consent Form for Learners

Title of Project: Exploring a Contextually Relevant Learner-Centred Education Model in Nepali Schools

Name of Researcher: Pritha Dahal

Prof. Dr. Michele Schweisfurth and Dr. Paul Lynch

.....

I would like to hear what you think about how you feel at school and while learning.

- You do not have to answer any questions you do not like.
- You can stop talking to me at any time.
- I have explained to you what the study is and you can ask me any questions you want.

Do you want to talk to me about experiences in coming to school?

Please put a circle around your answer.





Can I record our chat?

Please put a circle around your answer.





Can I tell other people what you think? I will not tell them your name.

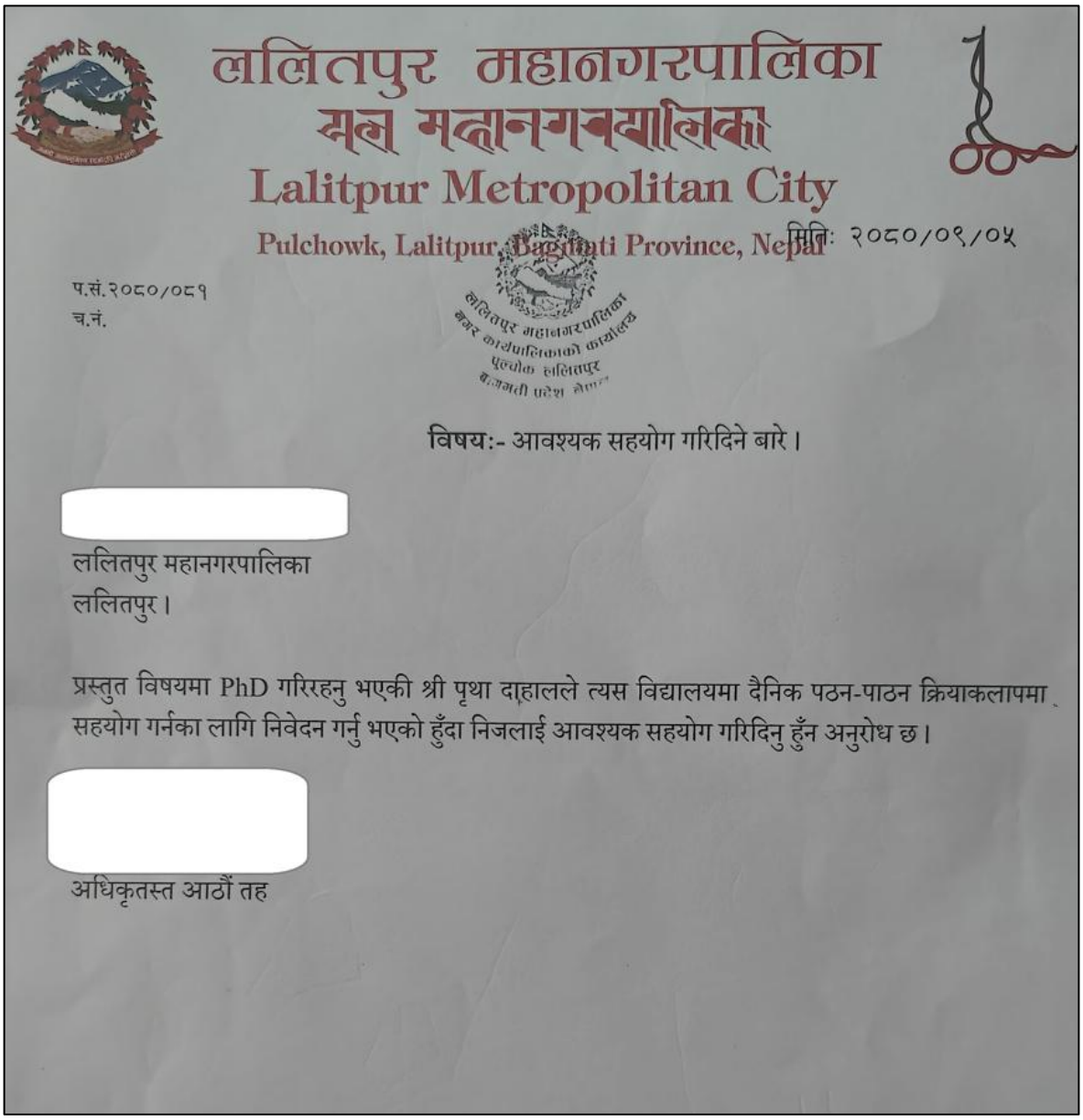
Please put a circle around your answer.





Please write your name in the box below.

Appendix 10: School approval letters



ललितपुर महानगरपालिका
मल्ल महानगरपालिका
Lalitpur Metropolitan City
Pulchowk, Lalitpur, Bagmati Province, Nepal

मिति: २०८०/०९/०५

प.सं.२०८०/०८१
च.नं.

ललितपुर महानगरपालिका नगर कार्यपालिकाको कार्यालय पुल्चोक ललितपुर बागमती प्रदेश नेपाल

विषय:- आवश्यक सहयोग गरिदिने बारे।

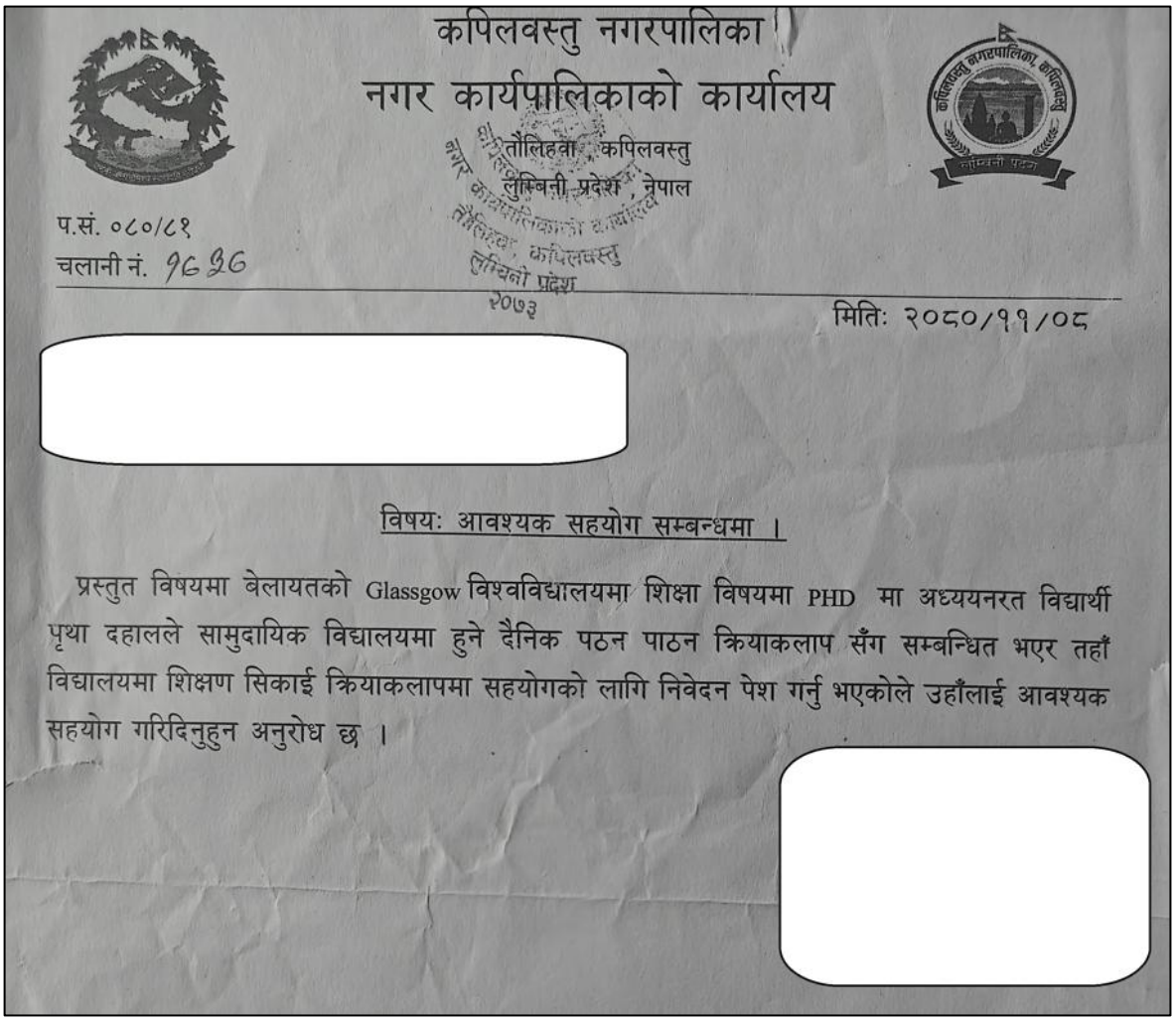
[redacted]

ललितपुर महानगरपालिका
ललितपुर।

प्रस्तुत विषयमा PhD गरिरहनु भएकी श्री पृथा दाहालले त्यस विद्यालयमा दैनिक पठन-पाठन क्रियाकलापमा सहयोग गर्नका लागि निवेदन गर्नु भएको हुँदा निजलाई आवश्यक सहयोग गरिदिनु हुँन अनुरोध छ।

[redacted]

अधिकृतस्त आठौं तह



कपिलवस्तु नगरपालिका

नगर कार्यपालिकाको कार्यालय

तौलिहवा, कपिलवस्तु

लुम्बिनी प्रदेश, नेपाल

प.सं. ०८०/८१

चलानी नं. १६३६

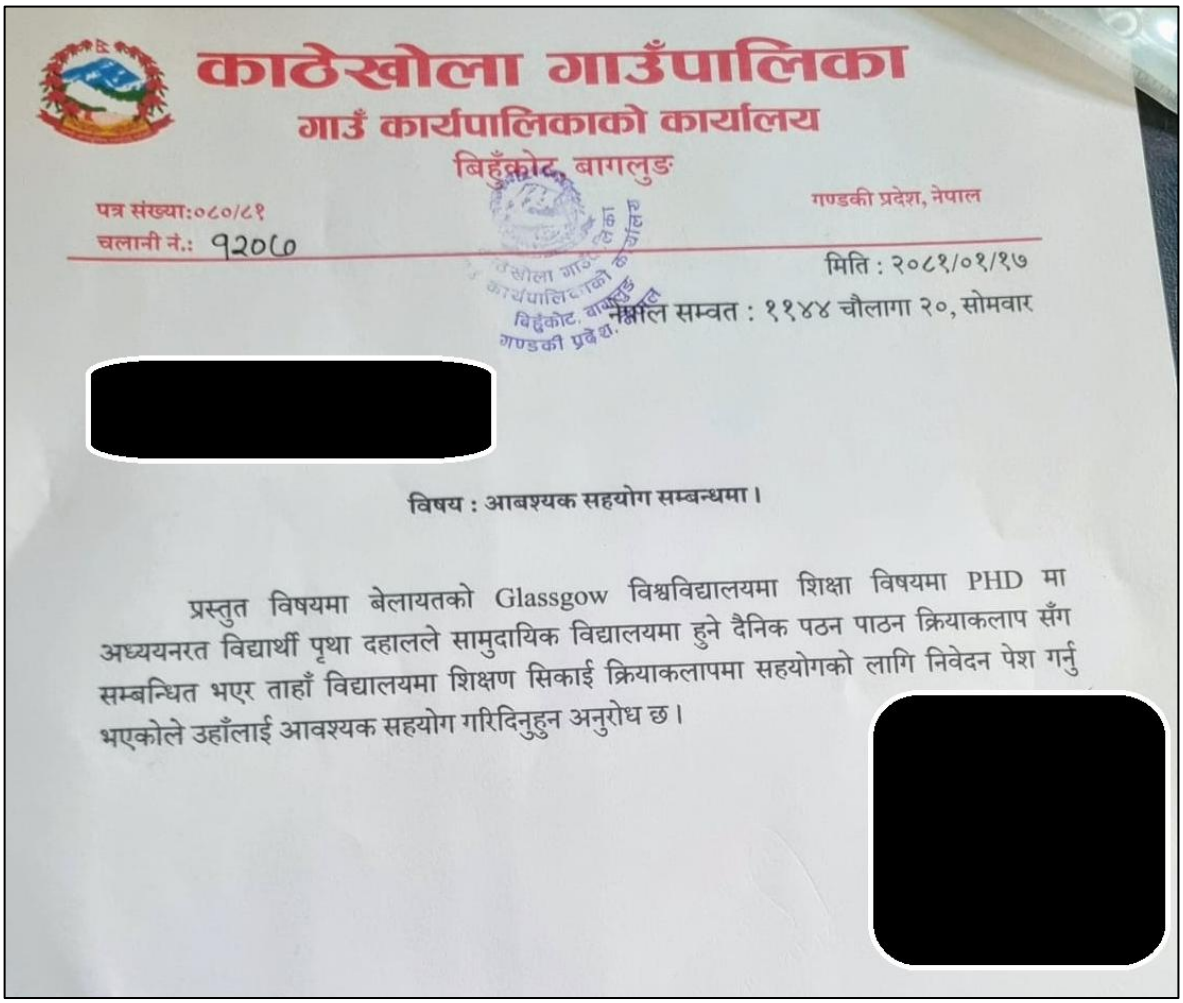
मितिः २०८०/११/०८

[redacted]

विषयः आवश्यक सहयोग सम्बन्धमा ।

प्रस्तुत विषयमा बेलायतको Glassgow विश्वविद्यालयमा शिक्षा विषयमा PHD मा अध्ययनरत विद्यार्थी पृथा दहालले सामुदायिक विद्यालयमा हुने दैनिक पठन पाठन क्रियाकलाप सँग सम्बन्धित भएर तहाँ विद्यालयमा शिक्षण सिकाई क्रियाकलापमा सहयोगको लागि निवेदन पेश गर्नु भएकोले उहाँलाई आवश्यक सहयोग गरिदिनुहुन अनुरोध छ ।

[redacted]



काठेखोला गाउँपालिका
गाउँ कार्यपालिकाको कार्यालय
बिहँकोट, बागलुङ
गण्डकी प्रदेश, नेपाल

पत्र संख्या:०८०/८१
चलानी नं.: ९२०८

मिति : २०८१/०१/१७
नेपाल सम्वत : ११४४ चौलागा २०, सोमवार

[redacted]

विषय : आबश्यक सहयोग सम्बन्धमा ।

प्रस्तुत विषयमा बेलायतको Glassgow विश्वविद्यालयमा शिक्षा विषयमा PHD मा अध्ययनरत विद्यार्थी पृथा दहालले सामुदायिक विद्यालयमा हुने दैनिक पठन पाठन क्रियाकलाप सँग सम्बन्धित भएर ताहाँ विद्यालयमा शिक्षण सिकाई क्रियाकलापमा सहयोगको लागि निवेदन पेश गर्नु भएकोले उहाँलाई आवश्यक सहयोग गरिदिनुहुन अनुरोध छ ।

[redacted]

Appendix 11: Search terms

The following search terms were used across ERIC, Scopus, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and the University of Glasgow Library's advanced search tools. Searches combined individual terms using AND/OR.

1. Core LCE Concepts

- learner-centred education
- child-centred education
- progressive pedagogy
- constructivist pedagogy
- problem-based learning
- activity-based learning
- participatory pedagogy

2. LCE Implementation in LMIC/LICs and Global South

- LCE AND LMICs
- LCE AND Global South
- LCE implementation
- LCE implementation AND Nepal
- LCE reforms
- education reform AND LMICs
- policy-practice gap AND LCE
- travelling policies AND LCE

3. Teacher Practices (within LCE implementation)

- teacher agency AND LCE
- teacher identity AND reform
- teacher voice
- teachers' lived realities
- teacher professional development AND LCE
- classroom practice AND LCE
- teacher workload AND reform
- teacher strikes AND Nepal

4. Learners' Participation and LCE Classroom Experience

- child voice OR Experiences AND education
- learner voice OR Experience AND LCE
- children's participation
- student experience AND Nepal

- school practice AND LCE
- UNCRC AND participation

5. Inclusion, Equity, and LCE Practice

- inclusive pedagogy
- equity AND schooling
- student wellbeing
- violence in schools
- corporal punishment AND Nepal

6. Learning Outcomes and LCE Discourses

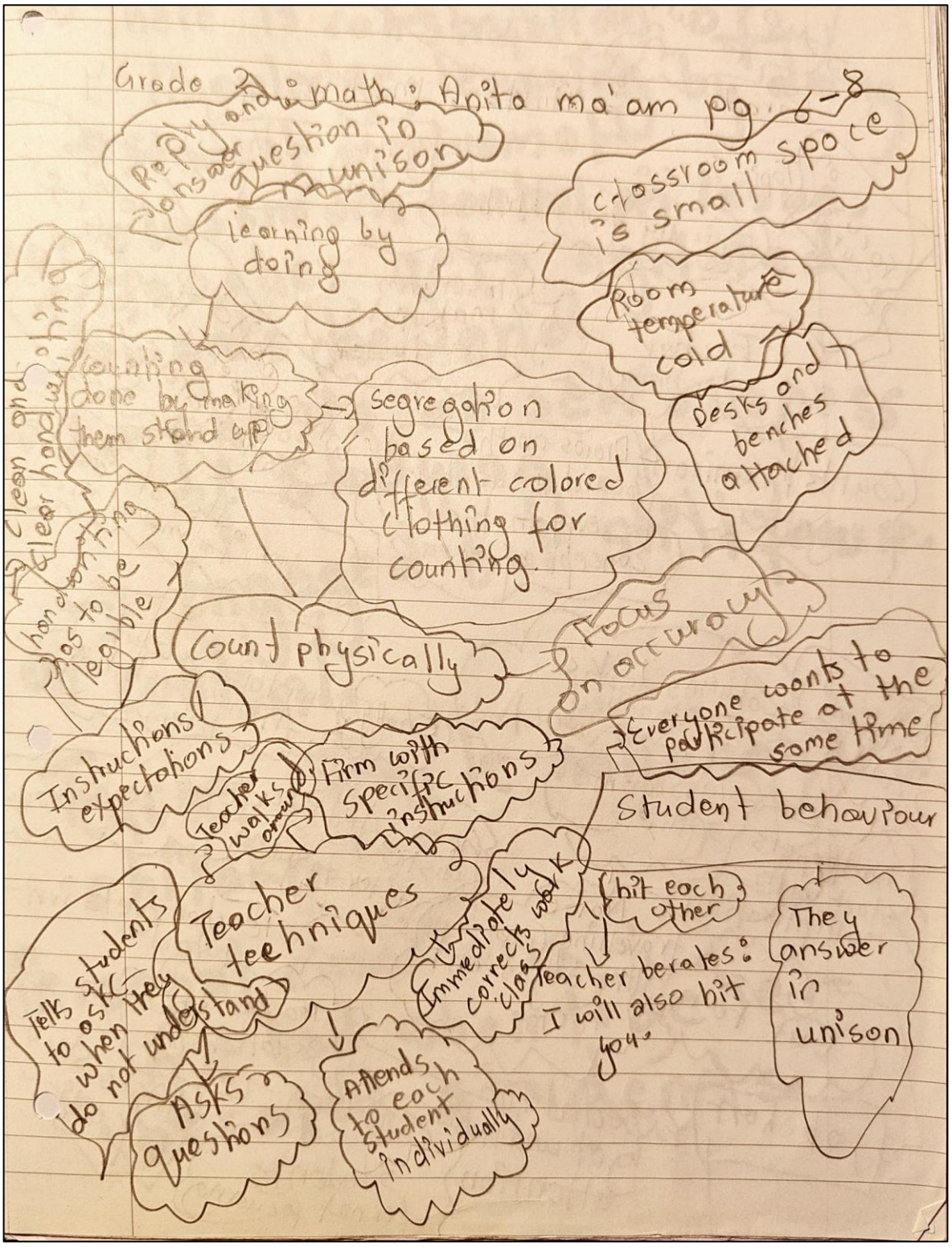
- learning crisis
- learning achievement and Nepal
- learning Quality OR LICs OR NEPAL

7. Grey Literature Sources (LCE-related)

Grey literature: Policy documents, Reports/ Newspaper articles [PL1.1]

- Education policies/ rules/directives/ reports: Ministry of Education Science and Technology website
- National Curriculum: MoEST, Curriculum Development Centre
- Reports on Nepali school system: UNICEF Nepal website, UNESCO, USAID, World Bank websites, as well as global websites for general reports, i.e., World Bank learning crisis.
- National census statistics: Central Bureau of Statistics website
- School data: Centre for Education and Human Resources Development website
- Nepali National newspaper portals for issues around corporal punishment and teacher strikes such as The Kathmandu Post, Online Khabar
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST)
- Curriculum Development Centre (CDC)
- Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD)
- Central Bureau of Statistics (Nepal)
- UNICEF Nepal, UNESCO, USAID, World Bank (LCE and basic education reports)
- The Kathmandu Post, Online Khabar (school discipline, teacher strikes, LCE debates)

Appendix 12: Sample of initial coding of grade 3



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