

Educational Opportunity in Neoliberal Era: A Survey in Public and Institutional Schools of Nepal

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Abstract


It is widely agreed that all children must be given equal opportunity of education. The ground reality, however, falls far short of this ideal, namely that children do not have the same or comparable opportunity of education. In this context, the objective of this study is to investigate to what extent educational opportunity is determined by type of school. This study discusses how neo liberal economic policies has differentiate the educational opportunity among the students of public and institutional schools in Nepal. The survey questionnaire developed through Delphi was used to collect data from 292 students of 8 schools (community and institutional). An independent t-test followed by G power analysis shows a significant difference of educational opportunity across student's school types. Children from community schools do not enjoy the same educational opportunity as those in institutional schools. So, the major implication of this study is that the equitable distribution of resource generally is fundamental to ensure the equal educational opportunity of all children, studying in community and institutional schools alike.

Keywords: educational opportunity, neoliberalism, family income, school type

Introduction

The concept of educational opportunity has been in debate since a long time and there are several different views. Coleman (1967) conceptualized equal educational opportunity of children in terms of four factors. They are: (i) providing a free education up to a given level which constituted principal entry point to labor force, (ii) provision of common curriculum for all children regardless of their background, (iii) ensuring that children from different background attend the same school, and (iv) providing equality within a given locality. Similarly, Brookeover and Lezotte (1981) as cited in Aksu and Cantruk (2015) and Ministry of Education [MoE] (2014) measured educational opportunity for children's access, participation and outcomes. However, Campbell and Klein (1982), as cited in Aksu and Canturk (2015) criticized this concept of equal educational opportunity and argued that equal educational opportunity means not just delivering educational services to poorest but unfolding their inborn ability and intelligence at optimum level. Similarly, criticizing measurement of educational opportunity in terms of its delivery, Tan (1987) argued that equality in delivering education to everyone does not necessarily ensure the equal outcomes or benefits. She

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further stated that the concept of equality of educational opportunity should develop from understanding of inputs towards outputs.

Educational opportunity encompasses the access to an educational environment that facilitates the development of an individual's skills and capabilities, enabling them to improve their own lives and contribute positively to society (Eucharía, 2018). Ensuring equal educational opportunity means removing any barriers that hinder an individual's full access to education. In Nepal, the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) includes the fourth goal, which aims to achieve universal access to education, with a specific focus on gender parity at all educational levels (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2015). However, several factors present obstacles to achieving this goal, particularly with regards to the types of schools: community and institutional.

While discussing differential educational opportunities among children, it is plausible here to discuss the two primary types of education system of Nepal: Community and institutional. The former is run by government funding and the latter by collecting certain fees from the students under either company act or *Guthi*. Besides, there are religious schools as well like Madarasa, Gumba/Vihar, and Ashram/Gurukul which are providing education up to lower secondary level (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2017). There are all together 27990 (78 percent) community and 7886 (22 percent) institutional schools (MoEST, 2024). Though the number of institutional schools is far less than community schools, there exists a wide gap of educational attainment between the students of these two types of school. In terms of pass result of the Secondary School Examination (SEE), the rate is much higher in institutional schools, reaching 89.9 percent compared with only 33.7 in public schools (ActionAid, 2017)). In SEE 2024 results, it has been reported that many community schools recorded nil results, including 12 schools in Gorkha, 10 in Taplejung, 13 in Ilam, and 16 in Banke, reflecting a nationwide concern (Dhakal, 2024).

In this context, the primary objective of this study is to examine the extent to which educational opportunities are influenced by the type of school, specifically focusing on community and institutional schools. By conducting this investigation, the research aims to gain insights into how the choice of school type may impact individuals' access to education and the potential implications it may have on their overall educational outcomes.

Community/Institutional Schools and Educational Opportunity in Neoliberal Era

The formal education system in Nepal started from the establishment of Darbar School by Janga Bahadur Rana in 1853 (Thapa, 2013). Before that, the education in Nepal was based on home schooling and Gurukulas. However, when we look back at the history of Nepali education, even until 1950, there were only limited educational facilities in Nepal and only selected people had access to it. Merely the 2% of the population was literate by that time (The National Education Planning Commission [NEPC], 1956).

With the dawn of democracy in 1950, the government felt extreme need of education. NEPC recognized education as the key stone of democracy and established an education board in 1952 to supervise and expand existing educational facilities. After 1990, with the restoration of democracy, development of education came in to practice in a very high speed.

The National Education System Plan (NESP), introduced in 1971, emphasized mandatory public basic education. However, the first private school in Nepal had already been established by that time (Nepal Economic Forum [NEF], 2020). The rapid expansion of private schools began after 1990 when the Government of Nepal adopted a neo-liberalization policy opening the door for private investment in education alongside other sectors. The seventh amendment to the Education Act in 2002 further clarified regulations for private schools, leading to an intensified growth of private education in Nepal (NEF, 2020).

Neoliberalism revolves around the idea that human well-being is best achieved by maximizing individual entrepreneur freedoms within a framework of strong private rights, a free market, and free trade (Harvey, 2005). Gaining momentum since 1970, it demands deregulation, privatization, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision (Harvey, 2005) It is both political and economic theory that promotes free trade, free market and the least possible government intervention in business and minimal public expenditure on social services (McChesney, 1998 & Harvey, 2005). It advocates Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) that includes forced privatization, public spending cuts and lowered taxes. Moreover, it is an ideological project that reconstructs values, social relations and social identities (Lipman, 2011). Thus, the impact of neoliberalism is not limited to economic sphere only but has a wider impact.

The adoption of neoliberal economic policy has led to the privatization of wealth and resources, significantly affecting the education sector and various other areas world wide. Nepal is no exception to this. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, the government of Nepal adopted the policy of neoliberalism. The government's market oriented economic polices let the door open for private educational institutions. The neoliberal policy in education, on one hand, limited Government funding for education, while on the other hand, facilitated the establishment of private schools. The investment in education from private investors is to maximize profit rather than do public service. Because the driving force of neoliberal capitalism is the quenchless demand for profit, it does not care for public or social or common good (Hill, 2003). This is the reason most of the private schools in Nepal are in urban and semi-urban areas as well-off families mostly reside in such areas (Lama, 2016). So, this marketization of education is responsible for the creation of stratified school system based on the income.

In the present context, the community schools of Nepal are lagging behind institutional schools in terms of pass result. The basic and secondary level survival rate and grade exam scores are low with large disparities in achievement between public and private schools (MoE, 2016). The students from private schools are doing better than their counterparts in public schools. While the average success rate of private schools stands at 90 percent, not even one-third students of public schools manage to get the minimum marks required to pass exam (Joshi, 2018). As 20.27 percent of the population in Nepal lives below the new poverty line, with poverty being more prevalent in rural areas (24.66%) compared to urban areas (18.34%) (National Statistics Office, 2024), a significant number of students still rely on community school for their education. The restoration of democracy in 1990 was supposed to bring a rapid transformation in school education system with inclusive and equal achievement outcome for every citizen, irrespective of their socio-economic condition. However, “the present education system is producing two classes of citizens: who are schooled and prepared very differently and who would perhaps never meet in their youth anywhere except, after their graduation, in the work place” (Mathema, 2007, p. 65). Thus, the neoliberal policy of the Government of Nepal fractioned the school system in private and public, which is eventually leading to construct two types of citizens: one is privileged class with lots of opportunities and the other one is less fortune, working class.

Educational Policies and Opportunities

With the establishment of democracy in 1950, the government recognized education as the key stone of democracy and established an education board in 1952 to supervise and expand existing educational facilities (NEPC, 1956). After 1990, with the restoration of democracy, the government valued school education more and initiated many programs to reform the school education sector. In 2009 the government of Nepal brought School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2015) with the key policy goals of right to education, gender parity, inclusion and equity (MoE, 2015).

In 2014, the Government of Nepal launched a program ‘Consolidated Equity Strategy for the School Education Sector in Nepal’ with the collaboration of some I/NGO (MoE, 2014). The aims of this program were threefold: to achieve equity in access by identifying marginalized groups; to strengthen equity in participation, retention and inclusion of those groups; and to strengthen equity in learning outcomes, reducing inequitable learning outcomes and addressing root causes of these discrepancies by targeted intervention (MoE, 2014). Similarly, in 2016, the government initiated ‘School Sector Development Plan 2016-2023’ with the aim of equity and inclusion in education across the nation (MoE, 2016).

These policies look sound and the government seems making good efforts to address the issues of school education. However, a vast number of children is still deprived of getting equal educational opportunity.

Method

The ontological perspective on which this study is based is positivism. The study seeks to investigate how the selection of a specific school type, particularly between community and institutional schools, significantly shapes the educational opportunity of the students. In line with positivism, epistemological perspective of this study holds the view that all genuine knowledge is based on sense experience and can be advanced only by means of observation and experiment (Cohen et al., 2010). Epistemologically I believe that the scientific study of society is possible and can be verified as well. The social phenomena can be observed, experienced and compared. So, this study has examined how school type determines the individual's educational opportunity by test and measurement. Since the ontological and epistemological assumption of this research is "single reality" (Creswell, 2009), I believe that only the quantitative approach can make justice to this. So, the data were collected through quantitative approach.

A survey method was used and within it a descriptive and comparative designs were followed. The descriptive design was used to show the demographic presentation of the students. Similarly, a comparative research design was used to investigate the mean difference between type of school and educational opportunity. Within the survey design a cross-sectional study was conducted using a "one shot-survey" (Dooley, 2001, p. 265) where the students were divided by their school type and saw their relationship with educational opportunity. By doing so, I tried to show whether community or institutional school is the determining factor for the students' educational opportunity.

As guided by Hsu and Sandford (2007), the indicators of educational opportunity and the measurement scale were constructed using the Delphi process. The study population comprised grade ten students from both community and institutional schools in Shivasatakshi Municipality, Jhapa district. The required sample size was obtained at 95 percent confidence limit by using Yamane formula (1967). A total of 302 sample was drawn out of 1083 students (732 of community and 351 of institutional schools) of grade ten following cluster sampling method.

School type is the independent variable in this study which was chosen by way of in-depth review of literatures and in consultation with the experts. Educational opportunity is the dependent variable which was measured in terms of the five indicators: access to educational resources, parental support for study, time available to study, access to school's facilities and teacher's support. For the purpose of inferential statistics, these indicators were tested independently with independent variable.

Data was analyzed by using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The relationship of independent variable to all five indicators of educational opportunity was observed independently. In addition, G* Power Analysis was also conducted to calculate the power differences.

Result

Table 1

Distribution of Students by School Type

School Type	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Community</i>	214	70.9
<i>Institutional</i>	88	29.1

Table 2

Cross Tabulation of Family Income and School Type

School type	Low Income	High Income
Community	84.1%	15.9%
Institutional	11.4%	88.6%

Table 1 presents the distribution of students based on school type. Out of the total sample size, the majority of students (70.9%), were enrolled in community schools, while a small proportion, (29.1%), attended institutional school. Table 2 displays the relationship between family income and school type, revealing distinct income-based patterns. A substantial majority (84.1%) of students attending community schools were from low-income families, with only 15.9% coming from high income households. In contrast, most students in institutional schools (88.6%) belonged to high income families, while only 11.4% were from low-income backgrounds. This highlights a significant association between family income and the choice of school type.

Educational Opportunity Across School Type

Children in Nepalese society receive education at either community or institutional school. To examine, whether there was significant difference of educational opportunity between the students of community and institutional school in the study area, an independent sample t-test was conducted. The result of the test has been presented in the Table 3.

Table 3

Educational Opportunity Across School Type

Educational Opportunity	School Type	N	Mean	SD	t Value	P value
Access to educational resources	<i>Community</i>	214	3.71	1.17	-14.85	0.00*
	<i>Institutional</i>	88	5.34	.69		
Parental support for study	<i>Community</i>	214	5.12	.99	-6.53	0.00*
	<i>Institutional</i>	88	5.69	.50		
Availability of time to study	<i>Community</i>	214	5.57	.98	-5.44	0.00*
	<i>Institutional</i>	88	5.95	.17		
Access to schools' facilities	<i>Community</i>	214	3.92	1.40	2.01	0.04*
	<i>Institutional</i>	88	3.55	1.58		
Teachers' support in study	<i>Community</i>	214	4.55	1.20	-0.69	0.48
	<i>Institutional</i>	88	4.65	1.14		

In terms of access to educational resources, parental support for study, availability of time to study and teacher support in study, Table 3 shows the mean score for institutional schools ($m=5.34$, $m=5.69$, $m=5.95$, $m=4.65$) are higher than those for community schools ($m=3.71$, $m=5.12$, $m=5.57$, $m=4.55$). In terms of access to school facilities, the mean score of community school ($m=3.92$) is higher compared to institutional school ($m=3.55$). The alpha values indicate that the first four factors are statistically significant with respect to school type ($P=0.00$, $P=0.00$, $P=0.00$, $P=0.04$) while the fifth factor is not statistically significant ($P=0.48$). This implies that despite having lesser school facility compared to community schools, the students from institutional schools of Shivasatakshi Municipality, Jhapa generally receive more educational opportunities.

Effect Size Analysis of Mean Difference of Educational Opportunity Across School Type

Following t-test result presented in Table 3, a post hoc power analysis was conducted to examine the effect size of the mean differences in indicators of educational opportunity that were statistically significant in the previous t- test. This post hoc power analysis made “possible to assess whether or not a published statistical test in fact had a fair chance of rejecting an incorrect H_0 ” (Faul et al., 2007, p. 176). Using effect size value, the G* Power software calculated the power in range of 1.00 to 0 where 1 means 100 percent probability of correctly accepting the research hypothesis and 0 means 0 percent probability of wrongly rejecting the null hypothesis (Shimkhada, 2020). To observe the mean difference between two independent means, the software gave three options of effect size (f^2) parameter: .20-small, .50-medium and .80- large. This study used .50(medium) for the analysis. Similarly, I used alpha error probability at 0.05 and power ($1- \beta$ error prob) at 0 .95. For ANOVA: Fixed effects, omnibus, one way, the software gave three options for effect size (f^2) .10-small, .25-medium and .40 large where I used the medium (.25). The alpha error probability and power ($1- \beta$ error prob) were used same as in t- test: 0.05 and 0.95 respectively.

Table 4

Effect and Power Analysis of Educational Opportunity of Students

IV	EO	Alpha	Effect	Power
School Type	Access to educational resources	0.05	0.75	1
	Parental support for study	0.05	0.77	0.99
	Availability of time to study	0.05	0.76	0.99
	Access to school facilities	0.05	0.24	0.62

Table 4 displays that school type was observed strong in terms of three indicators: access to educational resources ($f^2 =0.75$, $1- \beta$ error prob=1), parental support for study ($f^2 =0.77$, $1- \beta$ error prob=0.99), and availability of time to study ($f^2 =0.76$, $1- \beta$ error prob=0.99). The indicator, access to school facilities ($f^2 =0.24$, $1- \beta$ error prob=0.62) was not observed as strong indicator to make significant difference to

educational opportunity of students. This analysis confirms the robustness of the findings for the three indicators while highlighting the limited influence of access to school facilities.

Discussion

Types of Schools and Educational Opportunity of the Students

The findings of this study showed that there was a distinct educational opportunity difference between the students of institutional and community schools where the previous one enjoyed more opportunity than later. The private schools in Nepal run by charging certain amount of fees to the parents and are obviously from well off family (MoEST, 2019). Here it is very straight forward to understand that the parents who can afford the private schools, can provide their children educational resources, support to study and make available time to study in home.

Unlike the students of lower family background, the students of higher class do not have to use out of school time to earn money. In low-income family, parents cannot sustain without engaging their children in money making work (Mathema & Bista, 2006). Consequently, the children of low-income family do not get extra time to study at home.

Similarly, extra classes conducted by school contributes to better exam performance. However, only the students of private schools are fortunate enough to enjoy these facilities. The private schools in Nepal run extra classes, especially for grade ten students so that they can get better result in SEE. This is one of the reasons for the students from institutional school securing higher learning achievement than the students of community school (MoEST, 2019). Students of community schools who are mostly from low-income family cannot afford charge for extra classes and thus such facility is not available there except for few schools of urban areas.

Another reason of why community schools are lagging behind institutional schools in providing facilities to the students is the minimal involvement of parents in community schools. Bharati and Takao (2010) argued that parental involvement in public schools in Nepal is very minimal due to low level of the will of concerned parents which makes parents alienated from school also. As Bharati and Takao remarked, there are two reasons for the alienation: parents' own lack of experience and they are being considered by school system as illiterate member.

Similarly, community participation in school education is vital for bringing positive changes to the education system, as it improves the efficiency and effectiveness of educational programs. Community involvement promotes accountability and transparency while ensuring the sustainability of intervention, as beneficiaries assume ownership and take responsibility for programing initiatives (Sharma, 2008). Similarly, it is evident that active parental involvement in children's study can significantly

enhance their academic performance and knowledge acquisition (Paudel et.al, 2024). However, MacLean (2017) argued neoliberalism's rejection of "collectivist solution to social problems" may undermine efforts to foster community involvement in education by shifting responsibility away from systemic support structure to individuals.

The aforementioned problems of students and parents of community schools can be located into the broader picture of neoliberal economic policy that the government of Nepal adopted after 1990. World Bank, one of the neoliberal international agencies, which is promoting privatization, marketization and deregulation globally (Levidow, 2005) came in forefront to advocate the private investment in education and even urged the government of Nepal to provide incentives to the investors for the establishment and operation of the private schools in Nepal (World Bank, 1994). Due to this reason institutional schools started to open in almost every part of the country. By 1998, there was a significant growth in the private sector due to the prevailing school liberalization policy (Carney & Bista, 2009). This scenario created further difference in educational opportunity to the children. Highly paid schools maintain certain standard of education and linked with society's elite whereas in government schools' quality is linked with availability of teachers and resources (Bari & Sultan, 2011; Bowles & Gintis, 2013, as cited in Omer & Jabeen, 2016). So, the current trend shows that the public schools in Nepal are increasingly meant only for children of voiceless poor people as rich urban dwellers no longer depend on public schools for their children's education.

Conclusion

In the context of neoliberalism, the inability to afford tuition fee, extracurricular activities, books and stationery etc. prevents children of community schools particularly those from low-income families from enjoying equal educational opportunity compared to children from high income families in institutional schools. Neoliberal policies, which prioritize privatization and minimize the role of the state, have deepened inequality of educational opportunities by shifting the responsibility for education from collective systems to individual families. Consequently, students from high family income face no challenges in obtaining financial support from parents and enjoy more extra time for study, as they are not required to engage in household or outside work.

Neoliberalism's emphasis on privatization of education undermines the ability of families with limited resources to make necessary investment in their children's education. Besides, parents from higher socio-economic status are more likely to involve in children's education than the parents of lower socio economic background as they face structural barriers that limit their involvement. This substantiates the claim that life chances of an individual like getting equal access to education depends on family's economic level.

The stratification of students based on access to educational resources, parental support, study time at home reflects the inequalities perpetuated by neoliberal policies which focus on market based solution rather than systemic change. Therefore, education system should remain free from the influence of neoliberal policies that treats it as a commodity rather than as a public good. To ensure fairness and inclusivity, the education sector must be shielded from neoliberal framework, focusing instead on structural reforms that promotes equity and equal access for all.

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