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Two Classrooms, Two Futures: Nepal's Unequal Education

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A classroom can begin the day with a whiteboard, a library, reliable electricity and a teacher who has time for every question. Another may begin with the same determination to learn but face a shortage of materials, interrupted lessons or a long journey to school.

Neither scene, by itself, captures all of Nepal's schools. Well-run community schools exist, and a fee-charging institution is not automatically an excellent one. But the contrast points to a question that sits beneath every debate about examinations and education reform: what opportunities are children given before they are asked to produce results?

Nepal has spent decades expanding access to school. The more demanding challenge now is ensuring that the place where a child learns does not decide the quality of that child's future.

Counting the children is only the beginning

School enrolment is measurable and politically visible. It can reflect genuine progress: more children have an opportunity to begin education. Yet enrolment does not tell us whether a child can read with understanding, solve a basic problem, attend consistently or learn in a language familiar enough to support comprehension.

The Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2024-25, conducted by the National Statistics Office in partnership with UNICEF and published in 2026, provides a recent evidence base for assessing children's circumstances. Its indicators cover school participation and other dimensions of wellbeing.

Under the survey's definitions, 57.9 percent of children aged 36-59 months attended an early-childhood education programme. That percentage is not a secondary-school enrolment rate, nor a measure of whether an individual preschool has achieved acceptable learning outcomes. It points instead to the importance of what happens before primary school begins.

From early years onward, children arrive at school with differing advantages. Some have access to books, play, supportive adults and regular meals; others may be managing insecure housing, care responsibilities or interruptions to family income.

The formal school system inherits inequalities it did not create.

The price of an ordinary school day

Costs extend beyond advertised fees. Uniforms, transport, learning materials, meals, examination charges and time spent accompanying children can determine whether attendance is practical.

A school may be nominally close on a map and still be difficult to reach because of terrain, road safety, seasonal hazards or a lack of affordable transport. For a family whose income is uncertain, one unexpected expense can disrupt the purchase of books or a child's regular attendance.

These conditions do not prove that all rural schools are inferior or that all urban families are comfortable. Urban poverty can be severe; a household with several children can struggle even where schools are numerous. Geography and income interact rather than operate independently.

In Nepal, disability accessibility, caste-based exclusion, gender norms and the circumstances of children whose families migrate

can add further barriers. A child whose classroom cannot accommodate a disability faces a problem different from one who has an internet connection but little help with homework. Policy must be precise about which barriers it seeks to remove.

What happens after the school gate?

The crucial measure of education is learning. In May 2026, the government and development partners reviewing Nepal's School Education Sector Plan emphasised a need to improve foundational literacy and numeracy for all children.

Their joint statement recognised progress in access while calling for stronger classroom teaching, formative assessment, remedial support and evidence-based planning.

The statement's importance lies partly in what it does not claim. A new policy document, extra classroom or equipment delivery is not automatically evidence of improved learning. To understand whether reform works, researchers need to follow achievement and participation over time, account for differences between groups and distinguish a programme's intentions from observed effects.

Teachers need resources to diagnose which skills children have missed, then time and support to help them recover. Catch-up instruction cannot simply mean rushing through a curriculum

more quickly.

The language a child learns in

Nepal's linguistic diversity adds a dimension to school inequality that is often overlooked in national discussions about English-language prestige.

A child who speaks one language at home may enter a classroom conducted largely in another. The child may be intelligent and eager but struggle to interpret instructions or explain an answer confidently. This is not proof of an individual deficit; it is a mismatch between the learning environment and the child's experience.

A 2024 joint study involving CEHRD, the Language Commission, UNICEF, UNESCO and the British Council examines how language choices and teaching policies shape educational experience and learning.

The answer is not to reject national or international languages. Nepali and English can open useful opportunities. The challenge is to help children build those skills without treating the language of their family as a problem to overcome.

Multilingual pedagogy needs materials, trained teachers and clear implementation plans. A policy promise alone cannot change what happens when a teacher addresses forty students with different

language backgrounds.

Public and private: an incomplete argument

Debate about Nepal's schools often begins by dividing them into community and institutional schools. Parents may interpret a private-school fee as evidence of quality, while advocates of public education emphasise equal access.

The strongest argument against a simplistic comparison is that children arrive with unequal household resources and social support. A school's examination results may reflect admission practices, parental income, tutoring or prior attainment as well as its teaching. A ranking based only on raw examination scores cannot isolate school effectiveness.

That does not excuse poor instruction or unsafe conditions in either sector. Schools should be judged by their contribution to student learning, inclusion, safety and wellbeing—and by how they treat children who struggle.

A high-performing school that excludes weaker applicants before an examination should not be compared uncritically with a school accepting every child in its catchment area.

A glimpse of what support can change

UNICEF's published account of Khusi, a student in Kapilvastu, describes a child who had fallen behind in foundational learning and began making progress with support from a teacher trained under the government's Recovery and Accelerated Learning Plan.

This is a documented case, not an original interview conducted for this feature and not proof that every participant experienced the same results. It is nonetheless a useful illustration of the principle behind targeted teaching: children cannot always be expected to catch up through ordinary lessons when the knowledge those lessons assume is missing.

The goal of such support is not to lower expectations. It is to make high expectations meaningful by giving children the instruction needed to reach them.

The future should not depend on a postcode

The Centre for Education and Human Resource Development's Flash I reporting provides administrative information for tracking schools and students. Household surveys and learning assessments offer different views. None should be merged casually: registration, attendance and learning performance are distinct indicators collected through different methods.

For policymakers, a more useful question than the number of schools built is how resources reach students with the greatest barriers. Teacher deployment, support for early learning, disability access, safe buildings, local-language teaching materials and effective remedial instruction are not interchangeable interventions.

Some require capital investment. Others require consistent teaching support and accountability at local level. Every intervention needs follow-up evidence, not simply a completed procurement report.

Technology may improve access to content where electricity, devices and teacher guidance are available. But handing a digital device to a school without reliable connectivity or training can become another visible input with uncertain impact.

The quiet inequality of expectation

Two children may sit examinations under the same national system while arriving with profoundly different preparation. One has been tutored, encouraged and given time to study. Another has spent significant hours travelling, caregiving or catching up from interrupted lessons.

It is possible to admire a pupil's determination without pretending determination alone eliminates those disadvantages. Merit is meaningful only when the opportunities to develop it are taken

seriously.

Nepal's challenge is not to make every classroom look identical. Schools in different communities will need different resources and approaches. The goal is more demanding: every child should receive a real opportunity to learn, regardless of the family or district into which they were born.

A classroom door can open for everyone. The work is making sure opportunity walks through it too.

Reporting note: The two-classroom contrast is a conceptual device, not a fabricated observation of identifiable schools. Survey rates use the original definitions and cannot be treated as measures of school performance.

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