



## Parents' Social Value and Prestige in the Choice of Schools for Children SANGAM CHAULAGAI

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### ABSTRACT

Choice of schools is a significant factor that may affect children's future careers. After the beginning of privatisation of school education in Nepal, parents have choices either to choose government-aided schools or private schools for their children. The purpose of this study was to explore how parents' social value and prestige influenced the choice of schools for their children. This study analysed and interpreted data from a Marxist concept of sign exchange value employing a qualitative research design. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews from two government-aided and two private schools. Ten parents and four headteachers of those schools were the participants of this study. The research found that social value and prestige of parents are significant factors in the choice of schools. Many of the parents desired to admit their children to expensive private schools rather than in government-aided schools to maintain their social status.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The formal beginning of school education started in Nepal in 1854 after Durbar High School was established. Janga Bahadur Rana, the first Rana Prime Minister of Nepal, went to visit the United Kingdom in 1850. After his return, he established this school to teach English to Rana's children and Royal family members. This school was started at Thapathali and two teachers were brought from England (Sharma, 1990). This school was established near Ranipokhari with its building in 1891 during the period of Bir Shamsheer, the third Rana ruler of Nepal (Aryal, 1977). The school was only for the children of Rana rulers and the children of high-level officials because the

Rana rulers always wanted to keep the citizens ignorant (Parajuli, 2012). Regarding giving education to the common people, the rulers thought that the subjects should be less educated and less conscious of their rights (Shakya, 1977). Dev Shamsheer, another Rana ruler after Bir Shamsheer, started primary schools in different places in Nepal (Parajuli, 2012). Sharma (1990) mentioned that Prime Minister Dev Shamsheer declared free and universal primary education for the first time in 1901. As a result, around 200 schools (Bhasa Pathshala) were established in different parts of the country (Niraula, 2007). These schools were established for all children, but after a few months, Dev Shamsheer was

overthrown from power and most of those schools closed down (Vir, 1988). Very limited schools were established during the Rana regime in Nepal (Pandey et al., 1956), and the rate of opening new schools in formal and informal ways increased after democracy was established in 1950 (Caddell, 2007; Niraula, 2007; Pradhan, 2018). The ministry of education and culture was formed after democracy was established and this newly formed ministry centralised the education system in the country; introduced Nepali as a medium of instruction; and utilised education as an important arena for nation-building (Caddell, 2007).

The options in the selection of schools for children became wider after the rise and development of privatisation in education in Nepal which started in 1980 and opened the door to profit-making private schools for the first time (Ghimire, 2018). The division between Government-aided and private schools appeared in Nepal after the government formally allowed the establishment of private schools in 1981 (Chen, 2012; Pandey, 2020). The private schools in Nepal have mostly adopted English as the mode of instruction (Carney, 2003). Privatisation of school education expanded rapidly in Nepal after the country adopted Economic Liberation Policy in 1991 (Shakya, 2013).

Privatisation of school education was further intensified after the eighth amendment of the Education Act (1971) which was done in 2006 that allowed private schools to be registered as profit-making companies (Nepal Law Commission, 2018). The difference between a government-aided school and a private school is that government-aided schools receive grants from the Government of Nepal for their operation (Mathema, 2007) whereas private schools receive no financial support from the government (Nepal Law Commission, 2018).

Nepal has been adopting a dual education system after the beginning of privatisation in school education. This kind of dual education system has been created in Nepal when the education policy allowed

the private sector to establish private schools (Rana et al., 2020). The private schooling system secures parents' freedom to choose schools for their children (Kitaev, 2007). Even if the Government of Nepal has promised to provide school education free of cost to all school-going children, many parents are found to prefer private schools for their children's education. The issue of low quality of education in government-aided schools might have encouraged the government to allow the private sector to invest in education (Mathema, 2007). Private schools are believed to provide quality education (Aslam, 2009). The expansion of private schools has supported the government because it has minimized the role of government in the field of school education (Thapa, 2013). In this sense, privatisation of school education has opened the option for choice to the parents, and the parents who wish to admit their children to expensive private schools are allowed legally.

## 1.1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In today's capitalist society, a person feels more prestigious while using expensive and luxurious goods available in the market. There is also the value of prestige associated with the commodity along with use value and economic exchange value. The value of prestige, which is called sign exchange value, is also applicable in the selection of schools for children. Selection of expensive schools is not only a matter of quality; it is also a matter of family prestige.

Sign exchange is the process of creating value in which goods are exchanged as commodities along with the creation of symbolic value to the consumers (Koch & Elmore, 2006). Baudrillard (1981) has talked about the sign exchange value of commodities in detail. He claimed that every act of purchase is at the same time an economic act and a trans-economic act of production with the creation of sign-value. So, Baudrillard (1981) opined that in capitalist consumption, economic exchange value,

which is money, is transformed into sign exchange value, which is prestige.

Sign exchange value causes the loss of use value because the social signs and symbols have no real utility; they only have secondary utility (Veblen & Mills, 2017). Adorno (1941) insisted that this secondary use value distances itself from the needs of reproduction and carries a promise of happiness beyond the relations of production. In the capitalist process of consumption, economic exchange value is converted into sign exchange value because the consumer seeks prestige more than the utility of the commodity.

Baudrillard also discussed the formulation of sign exchange value in society. The dominant ruling class reserves the sign and the system of value to confuse the class conflict and puzzle proletarian consciousness (Baudrillard, 1981). Mortelmans (2005) studied how the desire for luxury in material goods is associated with sign exchange value. He argued that objects are not bought just for their use value, but also for their prestige value. The dominant class creates extra value and prestige in any product for obtaining a higher price and making more profit. Mortelmans (2005) further argued that an extra value of any goods and services provides extra prestige that creates a magical atmosphere for the higher price of those goods and services. How is sign value created then? Advertising and fashion are the fundamental institutions for the creation of sign values (McCracken, 1986). The propaganda of advertisement and fashioning is controlled and directed by dominant upper-class people. To distinguish themselves from others in the age of twenty-first-century people prefer luxury as a sign-value in the world of signs (Mortelmans, 2005). The more expensive products they purchase, the higher their status is ensured in society.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) believed that parents who occupy more capital are valued by other agents as the capital translates into symbolic power. Private schools have been historically connected to educational division and class

segregation (Forbes & Weiner, 2015) and have served those who have symbolic power to replicate class hierarchies (Ball et al., 1996). These evidences show that parents of wealthier children desire to acculturate their children in different moral and ethical settings. Abrantes and Quaresma (2013) studied the prestige factor associated with private schools and explained that to be chosen to teach in selective and prestigious schools is a source of pride for parents. This situation has intensified the value of private school education in Nepal.

## 1.2 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

This study explored the influence of parents' social value and prestige in the choice of their children's school. Parents generally desire to offer quality education to their children so that the future of their children would be bright and secure. It is believed that the children who study in expensive private schools in the cities are more likely to have a higher probability of a good career and wider exposure. There is a lack of sufficient research on why parents are willing to spend a high amount of money on the education of their children in private schools even though government-aided schools are providing free education for all children.

Even if people claim that they prefer private schools for quality education, there must be some reasons that are associated with materiality and prestige factor. Therefore, this study is related to how parents desire to seek social prestige and value in the choice of schools for children.

## 1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of parents' social prestige and value in the choice of schools for their children in the context of Nepal.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 MARXIST PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study has used the Marxist philosophical perspective as a research philosophy. The Marxist concept of sign-exchange value has been adopted to

discuss the data collected from different sources.

## 2.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

The research I conducted was based on a qualitative research design. I employed the qualitative research method for my study as I needed to go for an in-depth exploration of the participants' feelings, attitudes and experiences. Ochieng (2009) argued that qualitative methods are more applicable when the purpose is to learn from the participants as they experience it; the meanings they put on it; and the way they interpret their experience. Therefore, I collected qualitative data to explore in-depth ideas about the subject of my study.

I collected the views of ten parents from four schools and conducted semi-structured interviews. Similarly, I interviewed four headteachers to collect their views. I visited those schools many times formally and informally. I established

a close relationship with the parents and headteachers I interviewed for data collection.

## 2.3 SELECTION OF THE SCHOOLS

For conducting this research, I selected Hetauda Sub-Metropolitan City of Makawanpur District, Nepal as the research site. The selection of Hetauda as my research site was because I had direct involvement in teaching at some schools which would be supportive for me to collect in-depth information from the parents and headteachers. Out of the schools in this city, two government-aided schools and two private schools were selected for the research. Those four schools were selected purposively to fulfil the purpose of my research. Qualitative research primarily involves purposeful sampling to explore an in-depth understanding of the information (Patton, 1990). The list of selected schools and parents for interview for my study are as follows.

Table 1: *List of selected schools for study*

School Type	Name of the Schools	Number of Parents		Total Informants
		Male	Female	
Government-aided schools	Everest School	1	1	2
	Makalu School	1	2	3
	Narayani School	2	1	3
Private Schools	Bagmati School	1	1	2
Total		5	5	10

I chose five parents from government-aided schools and five parents from private schools. Out of a total of ten parents, five were male and five were female parents. For the selection of those parents, I took support from the headteachers and other teachers of those schools.

## 2.4 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

I selected fourteen participants from four different schools as described above. The ten parents were selected purposively from different professions to incorporate multiple voices. The details of the participants in my study are presented below:

Table 2. *List of selected participants for study*



SN	Name of the Informant	Sex	School Tyoe	Designation	Mode of Interview
1	Rabindra	M	Government	Parent	Face to face
2	Roshani	F	Government	Parent	Face to face
3	Julie	F	Government	Parent	Face to face
4	Radhika	F	Government	Parent	Face to face
5	Ram	M	Government	Parent	Face to face
6	Bharat	M	Government	Headteacher	Face to face
7	Madhav	M	Government	Headteacher	Face to face
8	Prakash	M	Private	Parent	Face to face
9	Srijana	F	Private	Parent	Face to face
10	Rishi	M	Private	Parent	Face to face
11	Arjun	M	Private	Parent	Online
12	Rina	F	Private	Parent	Online
13	Binod	M	Private	Principal	Online
14	Manoj	M	Private	Academic Director	Face to face

## 2.5 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

I applied semi-structured interviews as a major tool of data collection to explore the views, perceptions and attitudes of the participants. I interviewed ten selected parents from four schools, the headteachers of two selected government-aided schools and the principals of two selected private schools. In total, I interviewed fourteen people as my participants.

I took eleven interviews meeting the participants physically. I could not meet three of the participants due to some difficulties and interviewed them through online mode.

I audio-recorded the interviews on my mobile with the formal permission of the participants. Regarding the online interviews, I connected them in Zoom and recorded them on my laptop. I saved those audio records systematically creating a separate folder on my laptop

## 2.6 DATA CLEANING AND ANALYSIS

After taking interviews, I gave pseudonyms for each participant to maintain confidentiality and saved them on my computer accordingly. I transcribed the whole audio record into words. The interviews were conducted in the Nepali language as per the choice of participants. Later, I translated them into English.

Although collecting data in one language and presenting the findings in another language is very common in research, it is also challenging for analysis (Smith et al., 2008). There is the possibility of mistranslation and distortion of information. I directly transcribed Nepali audio interviews into the English language. While transcribing, I listened to the audio record carefully and wrote sincerely to avoid distortions. Sometimes I listened to the audio record two/ three times before writing. I was much more cautious to avoid the distortion of information while translating into English. I avoided many unnecessary information of the participants and cleaned them to make them easy.

## 3. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

This study analysed the data collected from parents and head teachers through semi-structured interviews. The analysis of data was done from Marxist perspective, especially focusing on sign exchange value.

This study showed that social prestige was found to be a significant factor in determining parents' choice of schools for children. Concerning the connection between school choice and prestige, the parents and headteachers expressed different opinions during the interview.

Prakash, a parent of Narayani School, expressed his opinion in the following way:

The parents of good income status feel humiliated to admit their children to government-aided schools. There is much hi-fi in private schools. The children are in good clothes and have proper sanitation, and they seem smarter. They go and come to school in vehicles. These are the signs of prestige for richer parents.

Prakash used the terminology 'hi-fi' when he wanted to talk about sophistication and glamorous exposure in private schools. The parents of richer family's desire sophistication and attractive exposure, and they do not find such exposure in government-aided schools. For this reason, they hesitate to admit their children to government-aided schools. The prestige value becomes much more vital for affluent families than use value. Srijana, a parent at Narayani School, expressed similar views. She shared:

There is a tendency that parents of high-income status send their children to private schools. If they send their children to government-aided schools, it becomes a matter of criticism and humiliation for them.

A general assumption has been established in Nepali society that the children of parents of good income must be sent to expensive private schools. Even parents from rural areas having good regular income admit their children to private schools and keep them in hostels. It shows the mentality of people that government-aided schools are only for those children whose parents cannot afford expenditure for their education. Arjun, another parent of a private school, also conveyed a similar kind of opinion regarding the selection of private schools. He opined:

Sending children to government-aided schools has become a matter of insult and humiliation whereas sending children to

private schools has become a matter of pride for parents.

When parents were asked about the school their children studied, the parents felt proud of telling the name of the school if it was a private one. Instead, the parent hesitated to tell the name of the school if it was a government-aided school. There is a difference between saying "my child studies at class three in a private school" and saying "my child studies at kaksha tin in a government-aided school" regarding the prestige factor.

The administrative leaders of the private schools also accepted the fact that school selection was associated with social value and prestige. Their opinions are as follows:

Some people might take it as social prestige. People might experience humiliation and hesitation to admit children to government-aided schools. But this kind of feeling is decreasing gradually. (Manoj, the Academic Director at Narayani School)

The selection of private schools was a matter of social prestige and pride for parents in the past years. This concept is gradually changing in recent years. (Binod, the Principal at Bagmati School)

Both of the administrative leaders of the private schools viewed that the prestige factor was gradually becoming inefficient. It might be true that the feeling of pride and prestige has gradually decreased in the mind of private school parents, but the expressions of many parents during this research did not support their claim.

Bharat, the headteacher at Everest School, shared his experience when his school tried to adopt English medium instruction:

When we tried to begin English medium classes in the past, we had a few students in the class. Parents did not trust us. They told us that the English medium would

not become effective in government-aided schools.

Even if the school tried to provide the quality of private schools with nominal payment, the parents did not trust it. It is because the school did not have a brand of social prestige. The headteacher told me that the attraction of people had been gradually increasing in later days because the school had been able to generate the brand of "boarding" by managing separate administration of English medium classes. It can be described as what Ghimire and Koirala (2019) called the neoprivatisation of public schools in Nepal. It means government-aided schools are trying to imitate the practices of private schools.

Private schools have also been categorised into multiple grades. In that sense, the prestige factor also differs as per the standard of the school. On this point, Arjun, the parent at a private school, argued:

There is a category even within private schools. People prefer the reputation of those schools. The choice of parents differs as per the social status of those schools. The matter of pride is associated even with the selection of private schools.

The social and economic status of parents is reflected even in the selection of private schools. The people of the affluent class often prefer a reputed school that would maintain their social and economic standards. The value and prestige of school choice are determined by the purchasing capacity of the parents. It means the economic exchange value is converted into a sign exchange value. Rishi, a parent at a private school, expressed:

Rich parents have a kind of understanding to send their children to certain private schools due to their network with other rich families. It helps the children for a future career also. It makes them easier for jobs and settlement without much struggle.

This expression indicated how the people of the wealthy class create informal unity and circle among the people of their class. They intend to create a circle and network with people of similar classes to maintain standards in life. This kind of circle helps them with business promotion, career development and job opportunity. It indirectly helps them to control the means of production in society. The children of wealthy families do not need to struggle much for their careers in life because their parents have already occupied the power and have captured the means of production in society.

The principal of a private school also shared a similar kind of experience regarding the aspiration of upper-class parents to separate their children from lower-class children. Binod, the principal at Bagmati School, shared:

The parents of upper-class families indeed desire to separate their children from the intimacy and contact with the lower-class children. They desire a separate classroom for upper-class family children. Such parents are ready to pay as much as the school demands.

His argument illustrated that people of upper-class families desire to maintain high-class standards in every aspect of their life. They also wish to dissociate their children from contact with lower-class children. The family culture, life style and ambition of upper-class people do not match with the people of lower-class. They do not calculate the expenditure and are not worried about the payment. The upper-class people search for a school that fulfils their aspiration of building a network of upper-class people only. The principal further opined that those parents have circles only with other upper-class people and they want to make intimacy and relations only with the people in that circle. People of the upper-class family do not have much intimacy with lower-class people. Their celebrations, gatherings and

many other relations are restricted within the same class of people. Due to this reason, the parents of this class do not wish to send their children to those schools in which children of lower-class backgrounds are dominant.

The headteachers at government-aided schools shared their experiences concerning the attitude of parents towards their schools. Regarding infrastructural facilities in government-aided schools, Bharat, the headteacher at Everest School, opined:

We have better infrastructure in comparison to many private schools. Support from different organizations is also there.

Despite this facility, government-aided schools have not been able to gain social value. Answering my question about the reasons for government-aided schools losing their social value, Madhav, the headteacher at Makalu School argued:

The educated and active people of society ignored government-aided schools. Government-aided schools lacked the support of community leaders. The people of the well-to-do family searched for similar kinds of prestige and value in education and they created separation from the people of lower-class status.

Madhav, the headteacher, claimed that government-aided schools lost community support as the leaders of the community like teachers, civil employees, and other social and political activists preferred private schools for their children. The headteacher also opined that government-aided schools have a responsibility to incorporate children of poor family backgrounds. As they admit the children of a working-class family, the parents of affluent families are automatically distracted from those schools. A school cannot equally address the aspirations of both working-class and upper-class parents. If it prefers working-class children in admission, the parents of

high-income status are naturally distracted. If the school favours the children of affluent families in admission, the children of working-class families are automatically sidelined.

After democracy was re-established in Nepal in 1991 AD (2046 BS), the neoliberal policy became much more vibrant and privatisation flourished in every sector. Private schools got established largely in city areas and became much influential in the education of the nation. The conditions of government-aided schools deteriorated gradually as they lost the support of educated and conscious people in society. Madhav, the headteacher at Makalu School, opined that a kind of classification in education started to appear after the political transformation of 1991 AD. The government-aided schools of many rural areas further suffered during ten years of civil war in Nepal. The war that started in 1996 AD further promoted private schools in the cities. Teachers Service Commission (TSC) which selects and appoints new teachers for government-aided schools through competition stopped functioning after 1996 AD. These all situations and circumstances led the government-aided schools to deteriorate the condition.

Many parents do not think critically about the selection of schools; they just follow what other friends and relatives have done. Rina, a parent of another private school, expressed the reason for selecting a private school for her daughters in the following way:

My choice of a private school for my children is because of our social situation. The study is the same everywhere, but I have the fear of how my society perceives me. I also have the fear that my children might complain to me in the future.

The expression of Rina showed that the selection of a private school for her daughters was not her independent decision; rather it was the outcome of her social situation. She believed that the study was the same everywhere and she had also

studied in a government-aided school. She had selected a good private school for her children to escape from social criticism and to prevent the fear of complaints that her children might make in the future.

The parents of comparatively lower-income status also try to admit their children to private schools to compete with richer people in society. Those parents want to escape from the psychology of humiliation and try to maintain a similar kind of status to richer families. Prakash, a parent of a private school, believed:

The parents of lower-income status feel that if their child also studies in expensive private schools, they also have a similar status to that of richer people. Maintaining their status in society is the prime concern of parents during the selection of a school for their children.

In my interview, Radhika, a female parent of a government-aided school, informed me that she had shifted her two daughters from a private school to a government-aided school. During the interview, she expressed how she had been criticised in society after she decided to shift her children. She stated:

Many people expressed their dissatisfaction with me when I admitted my daughters to a government-aided school. After I brought my younger daughter to admit in this school, many of my friends and relatives stated that I made a mistake. They said that her quality of study would degrade in a government-aided school.

Radhika's experience represents the true sentiment of people in our society. The people have a strong belief that to shift a child to a government-aided school is to degrade the social status and destroy the future of the child.

Roshani, a parent of Everest School, was a vendor who solely took the responsibility for her daughter after she got separated from her husband a few years

ago. She was compelled to manage everything for herself and her daughter with a small income. In the interview, Roshani shared:

Although I desired to admit my child to a private school, I could not do so because of my poor income status. I do not have to pay any fees at this school. So, it is easier for me.

The expression of Roshani was clear that she could not run after social prestige due to her economic constraint although she had desire to follow other richer parents. Julie, a parent of Makalu school, shared a similar kind of view. She said that she was not able to send her son to expensive private school because she could not spend enough money on her son's education. These voices indicated that those who cannot think of social value and prestige send their children to government-aided schools.

Recently, some government-aided schools are trying to regain their lost prestige and are trying to maintain equal status to that of private schools. Madhav, the headteacher at Makalu School, further claimed:

After 2070 BS (2013 AD), community schools have also started to improve their status due to the pressure of the government bodies, community people and the realisation of teachers.

In recent years, the Teachers Service Commission has been working actively, and young and energetic teachers are being appointed in government-aided schools. The government is showing much concern for the conditions of government-aided schools and the community people are also gradually becoming aware. Srijana, a parent at Narayan School, opined that the feeling of humiliation in admitting children to government-aided schools "is gradually changing as the government-aided schools are improving their quality." Rishi, another parent at Narayan School, also believed that "after six/seven years the differences



between private and government-aided schools will gradually vanish." It does not seem that the hierarchy between private and government-aided schools will vanish in such an easy way as claimed by Rishi because neoliberalism is further affecting us. However, indeed, government-aided schools are also trying to raise their value and standard for establishing their significant position in society. The number of such schools gaining social prestige and value are minimal and urban centric.

#### Findings

Baudrillard (1981) argued that in the capitalist process of consumption, sign exchange value precedes economic exchange value because the consumer seeks prestige more than the utility of a commodity. He claimed that the ruling class people try to misguide the commoners by creating social value and prestige upon some commodities. Mortelmans (2005) argued that the extra economic value of any product creates extra prestige, and consequently leads to a higher price. The higher price paid to the expensive private schools is associated with the sign-exchange value of school education. Wealthy parents desire to send their children to expensive private schools because the parents find higher social prestige and value in admitting their children to those schools. In this way, the preference for private schools is based on imposed sign exchange value on those schools by the ruling class people of society.

Admitting children to expensive private schools is not the matter of use value because the education they gain is almost similar even in government-aided schools. Parents of high-income status feel humiliated to admit children to government-aided schools as those schools lack any sign exchange value. Parents of high-income status admit their children to sophisticated private schools to maintain the social standard and to dissociate their children from the influence of lower-class culture. It is not the quality of education that matters much for the parents of high income in their choice of schools for children; it is much a matter of social

prestige and value that works for choice of schools.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study has concluded that parents of well-to-do families feel socially humiliated and insulted to admit their children to government-aided schools. Some of the government-aided schools in city areas have tried English medium classes to attract some middle-class parents, typically at the secondary level.

The factor of social power and prestige is found to be dominant in school selection. This study explored that parents selected private schools for children to maintain social status and escape from humiliation. Those parents who admitted their children to private schools started feeling more prestigious and superior which developed a sense of inferiority in the mind of those parents who admitted their children to government-aided schools.

The students of private schools who did not go abroad were found to choose the fields of medicine, engineering and banking which are socially prestigious and economically better in the context of Nepal. Therefore, parents also thought that if their children studied in prestigious schools, they were more likely to get prestigious jobs in future.

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