Promoting equity and inclusivity:
Exploring equitable leadership practices in diverse Nepali schools

Shankar Dhakal (iD)

Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

Abstract	Article Info
This qualitative case study explores the leadership strategies of three high school principals to promote equity and inclusivity amid multifaceted challenges in the diverse schooling contexts of Nepal. By shedding light on equitable school leadership practices within a complex web of long-held socio-economic and structural disparities, the findings reveal persistent educational inequalities stemming from caste discrimination, gender biases, economic gaps, and social prejudices. Leadership emerges as crucial in addressing these disparities, with empowering strategies showing promise in bridging educational divides. Policymakers, educators, and leaders can benefit from these insights in fostering equitable educational environments. As Nepal addresses historical inequities, the study advocates for systemic change and social justice in education, aiming to create a more inclusive future for Nepali students.	

Introduction

In a diverse landscape of Nepali education, the imperative to foster justifiable and equitable opportunities is underscored by entrenched socio-economic and structural disparities. The scholarly exploration of educational administration and leadership globally (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Capper & Young, 2014; Jean-Marie et al., 2009) resonates with the challenges faced within Nepal's socio-culturally diverse context. Historical injustices rooted in politics, culture, economics, and society have perpetuated systemic biases, impeding the progression of marginalised and underprivileged groups in the Nepali education system. This is evident in the distribution of school leadership roles, particularly with a gender disparity, as revealed in a government report (MoEST, 2016). The limited involvement and decision-making authority of females in school management committees, alongside the unjustifiable role constraints of head teachers (Heggins, 2019), compound the issue. Underrepresentation of women, ethnic minorities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds not only amplifies existing inequalities but also obstructs the realization of social justice and equity in education.

The new constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal (2015) has restructured the country into seven provinces that include four metropolitan cities, 13 sub-metropolitan cities, 246 municipal councils, and 481 village councils. Although it is enormously diverse socially and culturally, the constitution defines Nepal as an "independent, sovereign, secular, and socialism-oriented federal democratic republic state" (Constituent Assembly Secretariat [CAS], 2015, p. 3). Amidst this intricate historical and educational backdrop, this research seeks to unravel equitable leadership strategies adopted by high school principals within Nepali schools. By employing

qualitative case studies of three high school principals, this study aims to shed light on equitable school leadership approaches within a complex web of long-held socio-economic and structural disparities that obstruct equitable opportunities for students. Aligned with the global commitment to social justice and equity in education, this research aspires to contribute insights beyond Nepali schooling.

This research is imperative to address persistent disparities within Nepali education, offering insights into equitable leadership practices needed to dismantle systemic biases and promote social justice. By illuminating the nuanced dynamics of leadership, it aims to provide actionable strategies for policymakers and educators to foster inclusive environments and ensure equitable opportunities for all students. Additionally, given the global discourse on promoting equitable educational systems, this research serves as a valuable contribution to the broader academic community seeking to promote social justice and equity by employing equitable leadership approaches across diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts.

Research Questions

This research poses the following questions:

1. How do the case study principals describe their efforts to create equitable educational space in their schools?

2. What transformative strategies do principals employ to facilitate equitable, and participatory school leadership?

Literature Review

The global discourse on social justice in educational leadership (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Capper & Young, 2014; Jean-Marie et al.,

2009) sets the stage for understanding the broader significance of promoting equity in educational opportunities. In Nepal, a government report (MoEST, 2016) spotlights the gender gap in school leadership, accentuating the need for a critical examination of contributing factors. Heggins (2019) reinforces this by highlighting the constrained role of head teachers in fostering collaboration and social justice initiatives. In this diverse socio-cultural setting, Szeto et al. (2019) emphasise the imperative to cultivate equity and inclusion for student development in diversity. Despite efforts to foster innovative leadership practices (Szeto, 2016), a discernible gap exists between leadership practices and contextual realities. This gap, drawn from the author's professional experience as a principal, raises essential questions about the perceived assumptions of leadership and their inadvertent marginalisation of certain ethnic and caste-based groups (Sharma, 2020).

Historical inequalities in education access and achievement (Carney & Rappleye, 2011; Devkota & Upadhyay, 2016; Pherali, 2011; Pherali & Garratt, 2014) underline the necessity of exploring alternative leadership practices. The longstanding philosophy of leading schools without ensuring equal respect and opportunities for all students propels this research forward. In the socio-culturally diverse educational context of Nepal, deep-rooted socio-economic and structural disparities have prevented several marginalised and underprivileged groups from equal educational opportunities. These disparities are entrenched due to a historical backdrop characterised by political, cultural, economic, and social injustices, perpetuating systemic biases that have impacted educational opportunities. The distribution of educational opportunities does not adequately reflect the diverse population it serves. For example, a government report

271

(MoEST, 2016) reveals that only 22.1 percent of females are engaged in school management committees (SMC), and many are not in decision-making positions. Heggins (2019) pointed out that the head teacher's role in Nepal is also unjustified as they are not in a place to collaborate with stakeholders in their school and incorporate social justice through teachers' professional development programs. Also, historically women, ethnic minorities, and individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds remain conspicuously discriminated from educational opportunities, exacerbating long-held inequalities and allowing certain groups to have leadership opportunities and decision-making positions. Additionally, a notable socioeconomic divide compounds systemic biases, creating barriers to enhanced educational opportunities, and the patriarchal norms have contributed to the long-held inequalities and discrimination against minorities and underprivileged groups. Therefore, this mindful inquiry aims to contribute not only to the restructuring of school leadership but also to the development of alternative practices resonating with the broader education leadership community in Nepal and beyond.

Socio-Cultural Diversity

Nepal is characterised by its rich cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. People of Nepal speak 123 different languages that belong to 126 ethnic groups (CBS, 2011). Ethnic groups in Nepal were shaped during the nation-state building eras (Burghart, 1984). These groups are defined by the caste system in Nepal, language use, and ethnic identity that is further categorised by shared cultures and endogamy, the practice of marrying within local community groups ("Ethnic groups of Nepal," 2021). Table 1 below illustrates how these ethnic groups are broadly classified into five major groups: Janajati (36 percent); Brahmin/Chhetri (31 percent), Terai castes (14 percent), Dalits

(14 percent) and Muslim (4 percent%) (United Nations Fund for Population Studies [UNFPA] Nepal, 2017).

Table 1.

Population Distribution of Nepal by Caste or Ethnicity

Ethnic Groups	Percentage
Chhetri	16.6
Brahmin	12.2%
Magar	7.1%
Tharu	6.6%
Tamang	5.8%
Newar	5.0%
Muslims	4.4%
Yadav	4.0%
Rai	2.3%
Others	36.0%

Note: Source: CBS (2011)

According to the National Census (CBS, 2011), 44.6 percent of the population speak the Nepali language as their mother tongue. This is followed by Maithili as the second most prominent language spoken by 11.7 percent of the people (CBS, 2011). Table 2 below demonstrates Nepal's linguistic diversity.

Table 2.

Nepal's Linguistic Diversity

Languages	Percentage of People
Nepali	44.
Maithili	11.7%

Bhojpuri	6.0%
Tharu	5.8%
Tamang	5.1%
Newar	3.2%
Magar	3.0%
Urdu	2.6%
Abadhi	1.9%
Limbu	1.3%
Gurung	1.2%
Unspecified	0.2%
Others	13.4%

Note: Source: CBS, 2011

Considering the cultural and ethnic diversity within Nepali societies, the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal (the Government), as proclaimed in 2015, declared Nepal a secular country, thereby allowing people to choose and follow the religion of their choice. Table 3. below illustrates this diversity.

Table 3.

Population Distribution of Nepal by Religion

Religions	Percentage
Hinduism	81.3%
Buddhism	9.0%
Islam	4.4%
Kirat	3.0%
Christianity	1.4%
Others	0.9%

Note: Source: CBS, 2011

School Leadership in Nepal: A Contextual Reconception

In the Nepali education system, the dynamics of multilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic contexts pose distinct challenges for school principals. This diversity is not merely a leadership challenge but an added responsibility. Unfortunately, the prevailing perception of the principal's role in Nepali schools often limits them to the narrow scope of improving examination results, a notion criticised for its constraint on leadership roles and neglect of contextualized practices (Luitel, 2017). Moreover, criticism abounds as Nepali school principals are accused of adopting Western perspectives, primarily drawn from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. This inclination has led to issues such as underachievement, disengagement, and stakeholder dissatisfaction (Luitel, 2017). The School Sector Development Plan [SSDP] (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2016) and the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal (2015) aspire to align schools with the interests of wider communities. However, a stark disparity as leadership practices often remain exclusive of local contexts. Addressing this contextual detachment becomes imperative, necessitating a reconceptualization of leadership practices. This study, anchored in the case studies of three public school principals in Nepal, seeks to bridge the gap between global perspectives and the nuanced realities of a multicultural Nepal. The struggle lies in transforming leadership into context-specific and equitable practices amidst the challenges posed by political pressures, resource constraints, and socio-cultural diversity.

Establishing Culturally Responsive Schooling for Inclusive and Equitable Outcomes

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of Nepal acknowledges the multi-level diversity inherent in the country (Ministry of Education

& Employment, 2012). This framework emphasises the need for schools to respect individual differences, encompassing beliefs, gender, and socio-cultural traditions influenced by ethnicity and geography. In this dynamic landscape, equitable leadership practices become pivotal for fostering students' academic aspirations and empowering diverse social networks. Within this socio-cultural tapestry, school principals are entrusted with ensuring "culturally relevant and respectful pedagogical practices for diverse students" (Castagno et al., 2020, p. 743). This mandate requires principals to recognise and embrace the differences that exist in contemporary Nepali society (Lingard, 2007). Educational leaders, in contexts characterised by multifaceted diversity, are called upon to reconnect with their roles as public intellectuals (Gunter and Fitzgerald, 2008). The evolving educational landscape necessitates an ethic of trust, respect, and care for all students, ensuring an inclusive approach that aligns with the diverse learning needs, styles, and goals of the twenty-first-century classroom (Down et al., 2018; Safir, 2017).

Leadership adaptation, as Safir (2017) suggests, requires core competencies to address equity challenges and foster a culture of equal participation, collaboration, and empowerment, and learning is embedded in societal norms, values, and culturally situated practices within communities of learners. Hence, leaders play formal and informal roles in creating conducive teaching and learning school cultures (Browne-Ferrigno, 2016). Leadership, in this context, is viewed as the co-construction of mutually accepted values, beliefs, and expectations (Branson et al., 2016).

Leithwood (2007) argues that successful leaders must be open-minded, consider a wide range of options, and engage in decision-making that often requires thinking 'outside-of-the-box'. The role of school leaders

extends beyond academic boundaries, a particularly pertinent aspect in Nepal's ongoing reconstruction journey.

A Backdrop of Disparities and Inequalities

Despite the critical need for empirical studies exploring educational practices and leadership in Nepal, there remains a dearth of comprehensive research in this area. Existing literature on Nepal highlights the intensity and complexity of educational inequalities and disparities intertwined with broader societal problems (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). Stratification within educational institutions is marked by strong caste effects and gender discrimination, constituting an enduring form of inequality despite legislative attempts to prohibit them (Stash and Hannum, 2001). The root causes of educational inequalities in Nepal are multi-faceted, ranging from the pervasive caste system and gender discrimination (Pherali, 2011) to historical impositions of neo-liberal policies by foreign experts (Devkota & Upadhyay, 2016) and the proliferation of private schools. These inequalities contribute to widening socio-economic gaps in Nepali society, echoing the assertion that "schools can do harm as well as good in the development of people and societies" (Philips & Schweisfurth, 2014, p. 98). Reports by the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and UNESCO (2016) underscore the persistent challenge of unequal access to education. Approximately one in five Nepali children do not attend preschool, with urban areas offering greater access than rural counterparts (Panthhe & McCutchen, 2015). The socio-cultural landscape of Nepali schools, characterised by diverse caste systems and ethnic groups, further contributes to disparities in access and opportunities within primary education (Stash & Hannum, 2001).

'Shaking up' Disparities and Inequalities

In the face of these disparities and ingrained inequalities, school principals are called upon to be change agents, challenging long-standing prejudiced behaviours against disadvantaged and marginalised groups (Robinson et al., 2018; Devkota and Bagale, 2015). This transformation requires a re-evaluation of attitudes and actions towards the country's multiple levels of educational diversity. Educational leaders must deliver equity, inclusion, and school programs that demonstrate respect and consideration to all, even within a historical context of inequality and exclusion (Mathema, 2007; Pherali, 2011; Shields & Rappleye, 2008). The need to 'shake up' discriminatory culture aligns with the constitutional mandates of Nepal, urging principals to rethink their strategies and practices to provide meaningful educational spaces irrespective of socio-cultural backgrounds. As Robinson et al. (2018) suggest, this shake-up entails a proactive stance against discriminatory behaviours, aiming for transformative practices that challenge and dismantle historical inequities within the educational system.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership: A Theoretical Referent

This study adopts Khalifa's (2018) culturally responsive school leadership philosophy as a theoretical referent, emphasising the pivotal role of educational leaders in establishing inclusive and equitable learning environments. Departing from positivist research paradigms, theory as a referent facilitates critical reflection and creative interpretation, transcending methodological and theoretical constraints (Taylor, 2015). Through this lens, the research critically analyses findings, prioritising a pluralistic interpretation of the data to uncover underlying meanings within the context.

Culturally responsive school leadership is essential for addressing diverse student needs and advancing issues of social justice and equity in education (Klerk & Palmer, 2021; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). Effective leaders prioritise understanding and respecting individuals' unique backgrounds, implementing inclusive policies, and fostering supportive climates (Lopez, 2015). They actively engage diverse stakeholders, pursue ongoing professional development (Dhakal et al., 2024a), and collaborate to dismantle systemic barriers hindering student achievement through proactive community engagement and the involvement of diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes. Culturally responsive leaders advocate for diversity, social justice, and equity through anti-bias policies, diverse staff recruitment, and decolonising leadership practices (Dhakal et al., 2024b; Khalifa et al., 2018). By embracing culturally responsive practices, leaders create environments where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered, significantly contributing to the issues around social justice, equity, and inclusion in education (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa et al., 2018; Lopez, 2015).

Methodology

This qualitative case study research design (Yin, 2018) is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing the construction of knowledge through personal experiences and interactions (Kincheloe, 2005). Recognizing the significance of subjective experiences, this study adopted a data-driven approach, where research findings guided analysis and discussion (Saldaña, 2016), employing semi-structured conversational interviews (Howitt, 2019; Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019) with three high school principals (one face-to-face and several follow-ups), Adarsha, Bhawana, and Chanakya (pseudonyms). Two male and one female principals, each with a minimum of 5 years of leadership

experience at the same school, were purposively selected to represent minorities and underprivileged groups within diverse Nepal. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were provided with information about their role, ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of their information. Furthermore, this research received ethics clearance from an Australian university. Additionally, interviews with schoolteachers (three teachers from Adarsha's school, two from Bhawana's, and two from Chanakya's) enhance methodological rigor through data triangulation. The analysis was guided by underlying meanings (Yin, 2018) derived from interviews, exploring nuanced experiences within Nepal's diverse socio-cultural context.

Case Study One: Adarsha's Efforts to Create an Equitable School Culture

Given that Nepal's multiple levels of demographic diversity are realities that must be dealt with in educational environments, Adarsha strives to adapt, manage, and transform his school equity practices by using a range of strategies. The following strategies that emerged from the case study findings are now discussed.

Enacting Fair Treatment

To ensure everyone is treated equally, valued, and respected, Adarsha highlighted his strategy of discouraging unfair treatment within the school premises, considering that: *"We have no discrimination now, but we are always conscious of it"*. While several students in his school are from marginalised groups, there is *"…no discrimination in terms of caste, religion, language, and culture; instead, we always encourage and motivate the students from underprivileged groups"*. In keeping a principal leading by example and being at the forefront in terms of equality, Adarsha asserted that: *"A sincere principal can produce remarkable results"* and

contribute to *"…bringing visible and positive changes in society as well"*. Contending that principals must remain vigilant in terms of establishing and maintaining school parity, he signposted his role in bringing about transformational, cultural change as *"…a leader taking the lead visibly. They may encounter more risks and challenges, and more opportunities, more lifetime experiences. I think that's the blessing for life"*.

In endeavouring to establish a school culture that values difference and fairness for all, Adarsha acknowledged that *"…delivering equitable treatment is, of course, difficult"*. In this respect, community awareness is equally important as part of the change process. In promoting his school leadership practices, Adarsha explained that: *"When I go out to the community, I greet a tailor man or a greengrocer or housewives. They feel pleased"* to be included in school discussions. This approach is welcomed in Nepali society as *"…we have the situation in which some people disregard them only because they are from the underprivileged groups"*.

Creating Culturally Responsive Environments

Adarsha reported adopting different strategies to ensure a culturally responsive school environment that values and welcomes socio-cultural diversity. The first strategy he mentioned was celebrating various cultural and religious festivals to *"…make everybody feel that their culture, religion is the lifeblood of the society and is equally respected"*. As Arati, a teacher at the Aditi Secondary School, explained: *"When we have national festivals, we all celebrate them. However, we barely celebrate the festivals of every religious and ethnic group, although we have students from several groups"*. Similarly, Arati revealed that Hindu festivals were celebrated given their dominant religious group status: *"We also celebrate Buddha Jayanti but not others"*. Acknowledging that it is impossible to celebrate every festival from each culture, Alok, another

schoolteacher, explained: *"We celebrate national festivals, informing students about their historical and cultural importance. During national feasts, everyone in the school participates joyfully together"*. For Alok, he considered that *"There were no feelings of inferiority and superiority in terms of caste and religion. We all eat together, celebrate together, sit together, and do things together"*.

Although the principal stressed collective attempts to value every language, culture, and religion equally, Arati discussed the difficulties in the following way:

> *Most of our school students represent the Tharu or Chaudhary group [one ethnicity typically living in southern Terai and the far-western part of the country]. They all speak their mother tongue [the Tharu language], but we teach either in Nepali or English. It has been challenging for these children to learn in either a second language or a foreign language. They cannot learn as quickly as the other children who speak Nepali as a mother tongue. To address this problem, not only our school but the nation has not prepared any feasible plan. (TA1-para-11)*

Akriti, a teacher, took a similar stance, concluding that this linguistic issue is a national one rather than presenting a particular school problem. Recalling the efforts schools once made to address linguistic diversity: *"We used to provide the Newari language class [the language of this local community]. However, it was dropped as we have more students from other linguistic groups, and we could not provide classes for each language"*. In this context, the principal and teachers and the nation seek a pragmatic and constructive educational plan that addresses linguistic differences in schools. Although students represent different linguistic groups, they all speak and understand the Nepali language as well. Nevertheless, for Alok, language is not an issue, considering

that: *"If they understood only their mother tongue, it would be hard to manage. They also prefer the English language to their mother tongue. Therefore, we use either Nepali or English language in the classroom and outside activities"*.

Additionally, the school conducts co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that are available to all students. As Alok suggested: *"We conduct competitions like essay writing, quizzes, handwriting contests, and different sports activities. We provide everyone with the opportunity to participate without discrimination, selecting students based on their talents, irrespective of their caste, language, religion, and gender"*. Similarly, to ensure everyone is given equal importance, classes *"…celebrate the birthdays of all the students and teachers by treating everyone with special food and distributing sweets."* They also make special announcements in the morning assembly, and *"…everyone makes a wish. Nobody experiences exclusion"*.

Empowering the Underprivileged and Minorities

Findings make it clear that the Aditi Secondary School, under Adarsha's leadership, empowers and supports students from underprivileged and minority groups by exploring their opportunities. As Adarsha advised: *"We try to support students from the marginalised groups and the less fortunate economic backgrounds"*, explaining that as the principal, *"I work hard to support them financially, which provides opportunities to invest in their futures"*. His school efforts are premised on *"…not underestimating the rights of these communities but helping them, giving equal respect and care consistently"*. In using this approach, students are encouraged by *"…providing scholarships and other financial assistance with the help of the Ministry of Education in the Nepali government"*. Likewise, Adarsha extolled the virtues of ethical leadership by providing details of how students were supported: *"Last*

283

month, we had a program in which we distributed 4000 rupees [about 40 USD] to 20 students from marginalised communities. The students and their parents are encouraged when they are supported in those ways".

Case Study Two: Bhawana's Efforts to Create Equitable School Culture

Bhawana discussed the following leadership approaches that she practised as part of providing supportive teaching and learning environments at the Bhawani Secondary School, thereby promoting an inclusive and equitable school culture.

Creating Culturally Responsive Environments

Ever mindful of the importance of building a culturally responsive Nepali pedagogy, Bhawana asserted: *"We do not exercise any discrimination in terms of gender and any other demographic differences. We aim to engage, inspire, motivate, and provide opportunities to all the students regardless of their backgrounds"* Irrespective of school community complexities, she further contended that in developing equitable and inclusive educational practices, *"…the challenge is to treat everyone fairly"*, to create environments in which students can *"…comfortably discuss and improve their academic results, their opinions, and their feelings and views within the school community".*

To ensure non-discriminatory treatment for all the students, Bhawana outlined three strategies she had adopted. Firstly, during all school activities and programs, the school *"…allocates quotas so that students from different groups are included"*. This approach is designed to foster feelings that they are treated equally, irrespective of their socio-cultural backgrounds. Secondly, the school instigates *"…specific opportunities for female students from Dalits and Janajati, the underprivileged ethnic groups, as well as from minorities concerning culture,*

ethnicity, and language", an initiative that *"…ensures equal treatment and opportunities for all students"*. Thirdly, when there are perceived benefits and opportunities for specific student groups, the school works to *"…provide those benefits to the other groups of students as well. We never deprive students of their educational rights to equal access and opportunities in our school"*.

Empowering Underprivileged and Minority Group Students

In ensuring an equitable school culture, the Bhawani Secondary School aims to empower students from underprivileged and minority groups. In terms of gender equity, Bhawana mentioned that the number of females is now higher than that of male students, with the top ten academic performers in most classes being females. As evidence of a non-gendered school environment, she advised that female students *"…are motivated to learn and currently outperform their male counterparts, demonstrating that academically and intellectually, they are not the weaker sex"*. Moreover, Bhawana believes that females *"…feel more secure in the school when there is a female principal. They take pride in having a female principal, and this seems to provide further motivation to improve their learning approaches"*. Moreover, in creating a non-discriminatory school environment, the focus is on *"…generating greater opportunities for the female students who are from underprivileged groups"* and providing scholarships as further incentives for female students to continue their formal education. Additionally, as Badal, one of the participant teachers mentioned, the school also *"…provides academically sound students with a full scholarship and additional financial support until they complete their secondary school education"*. In providing these learning incentives, Bhawana's strategy involves *"…negotiating with school sponsors and potential donors and generating the necessary scholarship*

funds" and, as Bhim, another participant teacher confirmed, working with *"…individuals and organisations to provide educational textbooks and stationery resources for these students"*.

Case Study Three: Chanakya's Efforts to Create Equitable School Cultures

Chanakya elaborated on the leadership approaches he implemented to foster supportive teaching and learning environments at his school, actively cultivating an inclusive and equitable school culture.

Professional Strategies to Address Diversity

The information gained from various sources emerged as an innovative finding in that Chanakya adopted different strategies to address student and staff diversity and create an empowering and supportive school culture. In discussing these endeavours, he offered the following comments:

> *Firstly, we created different departments and increased their awareness of the need to ensure equal representation and participation of teachers and students. Secondly, we adopted the same strategy in staff management as well. While recruiting new staff members, mainly teachers, we considered the candidates' socio-cultural backgrounds and the need for equity in education regardless of the students' cultural and social status. We tried to maintain representative staffing that covered the maximum number of ethnic groups. Thirdly, as we have religious diversity, we are careful not to discriminate or dominate minority groups in any way. We have developed diversity and equity programs that value all students.*

Importantly, Chanakya advised that he includes as many programs from different cultural and ethnic groups as possible in the school

calendar, with celebrations used to demonstrate that diversity is valued and respected. By way of example, he explained that *"…if there is a certain festival for a particular cultural or religious group, the entire school community rejoices. We have created such a harmonious school environment that provides an important message to the community"*, demonstrating that *"…everyone in the school feels equally respected and valued"*. Similarly, he reported having *"…minimised gender biases, cultural and religious variations and ensured equal opportunities and participation among all"*. To further illustrate this point with culture, gender, language, and religion, Chankya discussed: *"We featured the Chaudhary dance performance of the Terai ethnic group, the Tamang Selo [a folk song popular with the Tamang ethnic group from the mid-hills], and songs that represented the suburbs in the valley"*.

Acknowledging Chanakya's statements about providing an equitable teaching and learning environment regarding cultural and religious diversity, Chetan, a teacher, commented *"…we do not have any discriminatory practices in our school"*. As Government policies emphasise the need to address diversity in educational institutions impartially and equitably, he stated that *"…school guidelines include information about a range of diversity issues, and we also practice them in the context"*. Giving practical and pragmatic examples of how their practice is demonstrated, Chetan explained: *"We often share our snacks with all the students without bias or discrimination. As teachers model non-discriminatory behaviour, students learn by observing our behaviour with other teachers and students"*. In the same vein, Chandan, another teacher, supported the viewpoint that there is neither discrimination among different groups nor domination over students from underprivileged or marginalised groups within the Chamunda Secondary School community. As Chandan made clear:

287

Our school supports zero discrimination, promoting equality by law and by school practice. Everyone respects one another. For example, we do not permit the segregation of people from the Dalit caste. Students and teachers belonging to perceived low-caste groups mix up with so-called higher-class people.

While Chandan believed there had been cases of entrenched practices of untouchability in relation to Dalits, the lowest level in Nepal's traditional social caste system, in some secondary schools, *"…there is not a single case here. We believe in equality for all and treat everyone fairly and justly, a practice that is an important asset in our school now"*.

The Importance of Ensuring an Equitable School Environment

In emphasising the significance of ensuring equality for everyone in the school community, Chanakya maintained that *"…everyone should feel included and welcomed in a respectful school culture. If this is not the case, teachers and students who experience discrimination are unlikely to perform well"*. In providing equal access and educational opportunities for all students, Chandan mentioned that *"…allocating scholarships is a fair process that is their academic needs and performances"*. In pointing out that the school has many economically disadvantaged students with complex family and social situations, Chandan appreciated the principal's leadership strengths and efforts to ensure their inclusion in mainstream education. He believes that *"…students' family circumstances should not result in inequality of schooling opportunities. As every student has the right to develop their true academic potential, our principal works hard to provide funding support for our most disadvantaged students"*.

<div align="center">**Discussion of Findings**</div>

Transitioning from Disparity to Parity: Fostering Equitable School Cultures

In Nepal's multifaceted cultural, linguistic, religious, and social landscape, the pursuit of equitable educational opportunities stands as a fundamental objective for educational institutions. However, historical patterns of discrimination against minority and underprivileged groups have persisted within the education system (Pherali, 2011; Shields & Rappleye, 2008). Despite the imperative for educational leaders to integrate cultural considerations (Brion, 2019), schools continue to operate within a societal framework that perpetuates existing hierarchies (Ross & Berger, 2009). This perpetuation manifests through the exclusion of marginalised groups from mainstream educational practices, underscoring the prevalence of educational discrimination across various levels in Nepal.

Caste-based discrimination, gender stereotypes, social disparities, and linguistic diversity contribute to enduring inequalities in Nepali schools (Devkota & Bagale, 2015; Mathema, 2007; Pherali, 2011; Shields & Rappleye, 2008; Stash & Hannum, 2001). While educational leaders are expected to foster equitable environments acknowledging student diversity (Faas et al., 2018), research reveals entrenched discriminatory practices persisting within leadership strategies (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). Gender-based norms and biases continue to hinder women's access to leadership roles, reflecting broader societal inequities (Elborgh-Woytek et al., 2013; Vella, 2020). However, despite facing systemic barriers, female principals like Bhawana demonstrate resilience and commitment to promoting equity and diversity (Bhattarai & Maharjan, 2016).

Similarly, Chanakya's experience as a male principal from a marginalised community underscores the complexities surrounding perceptions of leadership. Initial concerns regarding societal attitudes and stereotypes fuelled his determination to enact meaningful change (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2021). Bhawana and Chanakya's narratives highlight the imperative for principals to advocate for social justice and equitable opportunities for all students, irrespective of their backgrounds (Ross & Berger, 2009). Implicit biases within society contribute to perpetuating disparities in educational access and outcomes (DiAngelo, 2018; Banaji & Greenwald, 2016), necessitating a comprehensive overhaul of discriminatory practices (Wilson, 2004).

The synergy between schools and communities significantly impacts educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2021). However, entrenched social disparities and injustices within Nepali communities adversely affect schools (Pherali, 2011; Barr et al., 2007). Therefore, case studies highlighted that addressing these disparities requires sweeping societal change, with a focus on cultivating justice and equity within both schools and broader society (Vella, 2020). Findings further unveil deep-seated socio-cultural and educational assumptions that perpetuate social divisions. Notably, as highlighted by case study principals, disparities in educational costs and perceptions between private and public schools deepen societal divides, exacerbating inequities within Nepali society (Mathema, 2007). Addressing these disparities demands a concerted effort to dismantle discriminatory practices and promote inclusivity, thereby fostering equitable educational opportunities for all Nepali students.

'Maslow before Bloom': Impact of Poverty on Educational Opportunities

In addition to entrenched cultural, gender, religious, linguistic, and social stratifications within the Nepali educational system (Mathema, 2007; Pherali, 2011; Shields & Rappleye, 2008; Stash & Hannum, 2001), case studies highlighted economic disparities that significantly hindered access to education (Ealey, 2020). Less affluent families often prioritise income-generating activities over schooling for their children, as confirmed by the experiences of Adarsha and Bhawana. Even when children attend school, they often must balance academic pursuits with work to meet basic needs, prioritising immediate well-being (Maslow, 1943) over cognitive development (Bloom, 1956). Moreover, economically disadvantaged children are frequently engaged in domestic labour, further limiting their education opportunities. Despite constitutional mandates emphasising education as a means to alleviate poverty and discrimination (Constitution of Nepal, 2015), many children, particularly from underprivileged backgrounds, face significant barriers to accessing education (Mathema, 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, disproportionately impacting vulnerable students (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.).

Furthermore, Nepal's private schooling system exacerbates educational inequalities, as high costs exclude children from less advantaged families (Mathema, 2007). Despite the financial burden, private education is often seen as a status symbol, perpetuating social disparities. The superior performance of private schools compared to public counterparts widens achievement gaps, deepening societal divides (Chapagain, 2021; Mathema, 2007). This unequal educational landscape erodes social cohesion and perpetuates elite disregard for public education quality (Mathema, 2007). Against this backdrop, the discussion below examines pragmatic leadership strategies employed

by principals in this multiple-case study research, aiming to navigate and address the complex challenges of discriminatory and inequitable educational practices.

Leadership Strategies to Ensure Equitable Educational Opportunities

Research suggests that principals in multicultural school settings should adopt culturally relevant leadership policies that incorporate the tenets of indigenous cultures into the curriculum (Khalifa et al., 2016; Williams, 2020) to positively improve student engagement by empowering and encouraging student learning, irrespective of students' diverse intercultural backgrounds (Arar et al., 2018; Lopez, 2016). To eliminate the various forms of well-established disparities and foster non-discriminatory learning spaces for students with multiple educational needs (Van Mieghem et al., 2020), principals in this study showcased the approaches they embraced, approaches that demonstrated the educational benefits of equity and fairness in envisioning a culture of positive change (Fullan, 2020). Case study findings determined that their leadership efforts to move school practices from non-equitable to egalitarian ones involved significant self and stakeholder engagement designed to "address the systemic roots of disparities" (Galloway et al., 2019, p. 498). As part of this leadership journey, three collective strategies were used.

Their first strategy involved treating, valuing, and respecting everyone equally and discouraging discriminatory attitudes and behaviours in teaching-and-learning processes. This strategy is consistent with Faas et al. (2018), who assert that school principals should safeguard and

deliver equitable opportunities for students' overall success, irrespective of their backgrounds. Contributing to school parity, this safeguarding served to encourage and motivate students from disadvantaged and discriminated groups (Brooks & Sutherland, 2014; Khalifa, 2018), promoted cross-cultural understandings among teachers and students (Wells et al., 2016), and developed inclusive school systems that met the multiple educational needs of its pupils (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). However, all principals agreed that developing and implementing this strategy was challenging (Faas et al., 2018).

The second strategy demonstrated beyond doubt that principals' adaptation of culturally responsive school activities (Khalifa, 2018) was pragmatic and constructive in creating empowering and supportive school cultures (Faas et al., 2018). Transforming these cultures required collaborative, democratic, and advocacy-orientated leadership approaches (Klerk & Palmer, 2021; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). The situational examples principals provided included celebrating festivals associated with all cultural and religious groups; recruiting teachers and support staff irrespective of their caste, gender, religion, or socio-cultural background; selecting teaching-learning materials representing all cultures, traditions; and developing non-discriminatory school activities and programs. Findings validated their adoption of a culturally diverse and responsive pedagogy (Khalifa, 2018) that worked hard to eliminate the entrenched practices of untouchability, gender discrimination, and any forms of bias that resulted in feelings of inferiority and insecurity. The principals' overall aims were to foster educational environments where students and staff were valued and respected irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, gender, linguistic backgrounds, and ethnic and religious affiliations.

293

The principals' third strategy was one of empowerment that involved all school stakeholder groups, from government agencies to local community members, in efforts to galvanise and deliver future-focused educational environments (Faas et al., 2018). Shining a light on their leadership initiatives, findings included awarding scholarships, providing financial assistance to underprivileged families, and providing targeted educational programs for less able students. Students from minority groups, such as the Dalits, were encouraged to participate by being supplied educational materials that included textbooks and stationery materials. Adopting a culturally inclusive leadership approach encompasses ethical duty-of-care responsibilities (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Principals maintained their support by identifying and challenging the inequitable practices inherent in their school system (Arar et al., 2018). Interestingly, findings confirmed that students welcomed these approaches by demonstrating greater engagement with learning processes and improving academic outcomes (Brooks & Brooks, 2019). As Bhawana, the sole female principal in this study, explained, female students from underprivileged cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups outperformed their male counterparts (Arar et al., 2018). Notably, the primary goals of education include empowerment and social justice (Szeto et al., 2016); equality of educational opportunities and expected good outcomes (Arar et al., 2018; Brooks & Brooks, 2019); and strengthening the bonds between school and the community in ways in which all stakeholders benefit (Gurr et al., 2019).

To conclude, principals' culturally responsive strategies closely align with the attributes outlined by Khalifa et al. (2016). These attributes comprise: (i) critical self-reflection and professional awareness concerning their leadership attitudes and behaviours (Kincheloe, 2005;

Mezirow, 2003); (ii) making teachers aware of culturally responsive pedagogy and incorporating them in the school curricula; (iii) enhancing inclusive and equitable school cultures; and (iv) involving key stakeholder groups in the decision-making processes to foster engagement, cooperation, and collaboration. Hence, this discussion considered and interpreted principals' efforts in establishing a more equitable and empowering educational culture. However, achieving this in diverse schooling contexts like Nepal remains a persistent challenge (Dhakal et al., 2023).

Conclusion and Implications

This qualitative case study explored the leadership strategies of three principals in promoting equity and inclusivity in diverse Nepali schools, unravelling multifaceted challenges and disparities. The research findings underscored the persistent educational inequalities rooted in caste discrimination, gender stereotypes, economic disparities, and social biases. Through case studies, the transformative leadership strategies adopted by principals emerged as strategies of change. The leaders strategically shifted from non-equitable to egalitarian practices, emphasising equal treatment, culturally responsive activities, and empowerment initiatives.

Implications of the study resonate with the urgent need for a paradigm shift in Nepali education, urging leaders to embrace culturally relevant policies, celebrate diversity, and actively engage stakeholders in fostering inclusive school cultures. The findings highlight the pivotal role of leadership in dismantling deeply ingrained discriminatory practices and emphasise the potential of empowering strategies to bridge educational gaps. These insights offer valuable considerations for policymakers, educational institutions, and leaders striving to

create equitable educational spaces amid diverse societal contexts. As Nepal grapples with historical inequities, the study encourages a concerted effort towards systemic change and social justice and equity in education, ultimately shaping a more inclusive future for Nepali students.

Acknowledgements

I extend my sincere appreciation to Associate Professors Andrew Jones and Geoffrey W. Lummis from the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. Their consistent encouragement, thorough guidance, insightful critiques, invaluable support in writing, and substantial contributions to editorial and stylistic improvements have been instrumental in refining and elevating the quality of this paper.

References

Allen, K. A., Slaten, C. D., Arslan, G., Roffey, S., Craig, H., & Vella-Brodrick, D. A. (2021). School belonging: The importance of student and teacher relationships. In M. L. Kern & M. L. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of positive education* (pp. 525–550). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64537-3_21

Arar, K., Örücü, D., & Ak Küçükçayır, G. (2018). Culturally relevant school leadership for Syrian refugee students in challenging circumstances. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *47*(6), 960–979. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143218775430

Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. (2016). *Blindspot: Hidden biases of good people*. Bantam.

Bhattarai, P. C., & Maharjan, J. (2016). Ethical decision making among women education leaders: A case of Nepal. In T. N. Watson & A. H. Normore (Eds.), *Racially and ethnically diverse women leading education: A worldview. (Advances in Educational Administration, Vol. 25)* (pp. 219–233). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals*. Longmans, Green.

Bogotch, I., & Shields, C. M. (Eds.). (2014). *International handbook of educational leadership and social (in) justice* (Vol. 29). Springer.

Branson, C. M., Franken, M., & Penney, D. (2016). Reconceptualising middle leadership in higher education: A transrelational approach. In J. McNiff (Ed.), *Values and virtues in higher education research: Critical perspectives* (pp. 155–170). Routledge.

Brion, C. (2019). Cultural proficiency: The missing link to student learning. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 22*(4), 99–114. http://doi.org/10.1177/1555458919870564

Brooks, M. C., & Brooks, J. S. (2019). Culturally (ir)relevant school leadership: Ethno-religious conflict and school administration in the Philippines. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 22*(1), 6–29. http://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1503819

Brooks, M. C., & Sutherland, I. E. (2014). Educational leadership in the Philippines: Principals' perspectives on possibilities for change. *Planning and Changing, 45*(3/4), 339–355.

Browne-Ferrigno, T. (2016). Developing and empowering leaders for collective school leadership: Introduction to special issue. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 11*(2), 151–157. http://doi.org/10.1177/1942775116658820

Buchmann, C., & Hannum, E. (2001). Education and stratification in developing countries: A review of theories and research. *Annual Review of Sociology, 27*(1), 77–102. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.77

Burghart, R. (1984). The formation of the concept of nation-state in Nepal. *The Journal of Asian Studies, 44*(1), 101–125. https://doi.org/10.2307/2056748

Bush, K. D., & Saltarelli, D. (2000). *Two faces of education in ethnic conflict: Towards a peacebuilding education for children.* UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre.

Capper, C. A., & Young, M. D. (2014). Ironies and limitations of educational leadership for social justice: A call to social justice educators. *Theory into Practice*, *53*(2), 158–1 64. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.885814

Carney, S., & Rappleye, J. (2011). Education reform in Nepal: from modernity to conflict. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 9*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2010.513274

Castagno, A., Solyom, J., & Brayboy, B. (2020). Culturally responsive schooling as a form of critical pedagogies for indigenous youth and tribal nations. In S. R. Steinberg, & B. Down (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of critical pedagogies* (Vol. 3, pp. 743–757). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526486455.n71

Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS]. (2011). *National population and housing census*. Kathmandu, Nepal.

Chapagain, Y. (2021). School student academic performance in Nepal: An analysis using the School Education Exam (SEE) results. *International Journal on Studies in Education (IJonSE), 3*(1), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.34

Constituent Assembly Secretariat [CAS]. (2015). *The constitution of Nepal-2015*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal.

DeMatthews, D. E., Serafini, A., & Watson, T. N. (2021). Leading inclusive schools: Principal perceptions, practices, and challenges to meaningful change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *57*(1), 3–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X20913897

Devkota, S. C., & Upadhyay, M. P. (2016). How does education inequality respond to policy? A method and application to survey data from Albania and Nepal. *Journal of Economic Studies, 43*(2), 166–177.

Devkota, S. P., & Bagale, S. (2015). Social inequality in Nepal and right of education. *Journal of Poverty, Investment and Development, 8*, 1–4.

Dhakal, S., Jones, A., & Lummis, G. W. (2023). Leadership as a challenging opportunity: Nepali secondary principals' contextual understandings and perceptions of their roles. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 26*(5). https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2023.2276355

Dhakal, S., Lummis, G. W., & Jones, A. (2024a). Continuous professional development strategies of Nepali secondary

principals: Navigating challenges in changing times. *Journal of Educational Administration and History.* https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2023.2298322

Dhakal, S., Panta, C. N., Wagle, S. K., & Dhungana, S. (2024b). Decolonising educational leadership in Nepal: An advocacy for revisiting Eurocentric legacy and promoting epistemic indigeneity. In A. E. Lopez & H. Singh (Eds.), *Decolonising educational knowledge: International perspectives and contestations*. Palgrave MacMillan.

DiAngelo, R. J. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard to talk to white people about racism*. Beacon Press.

Down, B., Smyth, J., & Robinson, J. (2018). Giving all students a fair go. In B. Down, J. Smyth, & J. Robinson (Eds.), *Rethinking school-to-work transitions in Australia: young people have something to say* (pp. 117–131). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72269-6_7

Ealey, L. (2020). *Around the world: Children's lack of access to fundamental rights in Nepal and the effects the Nepalese legal system has on poverty, health, education, child labour, child trafficking, and child marriage*. https://lawecommons.luc.edu/clrj/vol39/iss2/9

Elborgh-Woytek, K., Newiak, M., Kochhar, K., Fabrizio, S., Kpodar, K. R., Wingender, P., Clements, B. J., & Schwartz, G. (2013). *Women, work, and the economy: Macroeconomic gains from gender equity*. International Monetary Fund. https://doi.org/10.5089/9781475566567.006

Ethnic Groups in Nepal. (2021, February 25). In *Wikipedia.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_groups_in_Nepal

Faas, D., Smith, A., & Darmody, M. (2018). The role of principals in creating inclusive school environments: Insights from community national schools in Ireland. *School Leadership & Management, 38*(4), 457–473. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1430688

Fullan, M. (2020). *Leading in a culture of change* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Galloway, M. K., Callin, P., James, S., Vimegnon, H., & McCall, L. (2019). Culturally responsive, antiracist, or anti-oppressive? How language matters for school change efforts. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 52*(4), 485–501. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1691959

Gunter, H., & Fitzgerald, T. (2008). The future of leadership research? *School Leadership and Management, 28*(3), 261–279. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430802145902

Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Longmuir, F., & McCrohan, K. (2019). Successful school leadership that is culturally sensitive but not context constrained. In E. T. Murakami, D. Gurr, & R. Notman (Eds.), *Educational leadership, culture, and success in high-need schools* (pp. 25–43). (International Research on School Leadership). Information Age Publishing.

Heggins, J. B. (2019). *Social justice development and practice in school leaders in Nepal*. [An unpublished doctoral dissertation]. School of Education, The University of Leeds.

Howitt, D. (2019). *Introduction to qualitative research methods in psychology*. Pearson Education Limited. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

Jean-Marie, G., Normore, A. H., & Brooks, J. S. (2009). Leadership for social justice: Preparing 21st-century school leaders for a new social order. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 4(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/194277510900400102

Khalifa, M. A. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.

Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(4), 1272–1311. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316630383

Khalifa, M.A., Khalil, D., Marsh, T.E., & Halloran, C. (2018). Toward an Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership: A Literature Review. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 55*(4), 571-614. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18809348

Kincheloe, J. (2005). *Critical constructivism primer*. Peter Lang.

Klerk, E. D. D. and Palmer, J. M. (2021). Resetting education priorities during COVID-19: towards equitable learning opportunities through inclusion and equity. *Perspectives in Education, 39*(1), 12-28. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593x/pie.v39.i1.2

Leithwood, K. (2007). What we know about educational leadership. In J. M. Burger, C. Webber & P. Klinck (Eds.), *Intelligent leadership: Constructs for thinking education leaders* (pp. 41–66). Springer.

Lingard, B. (2007). Pedagogies of indifference. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 11*(3), 245–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110701237498

Lopez, A. (2015). Navigating cultural borders in diverse contexts: Building capacity through culturally responsive leadership and critical praxis. *Multicultural Education Review, 7,* 171-184. https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2015.1072080.

Lopez, A. (2016). *Culturally responsive and socially just leadership in diverse contexts*. Palgrave.

Luitel, B. C. (2017). A mindful inquiry into reductionism in mathematics education. In M. Powietrzynska & K. Tobin (Eds.), *Weaving complementary knowledge systems and mindful-ness to educate a literate citizenry for sustainable and healthy lives* (pp. 285–214). Sense.

Maslow, A. H. (1943). *A theory of human motivation: A psychological research that helped change the field for good*. General Press.

Mathema, K. B. (2007). Crisis in education and future challenges for Nepal. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research, 31,* 46–66. https://www.himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/eb/hr/pdf/EBHR_31_04.pdf

Ministry of Education [MOE]. (2016). *School sector development plan, 2016–2023*. https://www.moe.gov.np/assets/uploads/files/SSDP_Book_English_Final_July_5,_2017.pdf

Ministry of Education and Employment. (2012). *A national curriculum framework for all 2012*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Author.

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2016). *Flash II report 2072(2015-016).* Sanothimi, Bhaktapur, Nepal: Authors.

Ministry of Education, Science & Technology. (2016). *Education in figures (At a glance report).* Kathmandu, Nepal.

Panthhe, K. P., & McCutcheon, A. L. (2015). Gender difference in rural urban education in Nepal. *European Journal of Educational Sciences (EJES), 2*(2), 61–79.

Pherali, T. J. (2011). Education and conflict in Nepal: Possibilities for reconstruction. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 9*(1), 135–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2010.513590

Pherali, T., & Garratt, D. (2014). Post-conflict identity crisis in Nepal: Implications for educational reforms. *International Journal of Educational Development, 34*(1), 42–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.12.004

Philips, D., & Schweisfurth, M. (2014). *Comparative and international education: An introduction to theory, method, and practice* (2ⁿᵈ ed.). Bloomsbury.

Robinson, J., Down, B., & Smyth, J. (2018). 'Shaking up' neoliberal policy in schools: Looking for democratic alternatives in *Jacinta's* satchel. *Global Studies of Childhood, 8*(4), 392–403. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610618814841

Ross, J. A., & Berger, M. J. (2009). Equity and leadership: Research-based strategies for school leaders. *School Leadership and Management, 29*(5), 463–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430903152310

Safir, S. (2017). *The listening leader: Creating the conditions for equitable school transformation.* Jossey-Bass.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.

Sharma, U. (2020). Inclusive education in the pacific: Challenges and the opportunities. *Prospects*. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09498-7

Shields, C. M. (2014). Ethical leadership: A critical transformative approach. In C. M. Branson & S. J. Gross (Eds.), *Handbook of ethical educational leadership* (pp. 24–42). Routledge.

Stash, S., & Hannum, E. (2001). Who goes to school? Educational stratification by gender, caste, and ethnicity in Nepal. *Comparative Educational Review, 45*(3), 354–378. https://doi.org/10.1086/447676

Szeto, E. (2016). Equal educational opportunity? Global policy development and local practices in diverse school contexts. *Hong Kong Journal of Special Education, 18*, 1–13.

Tasker, T. J., & Cisneroz, A. (2019). Open-ended questions in qualitative research: Keeping an open mind as researchers. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue, 21*(1–2), 119–122. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A607761068/AONE?u=anon~862acd5&sid=googleScholar&xid=0830f886

Taylor, P. C. (2015). Transformative science education. In R. Gunstone (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of science education* (pp. 1079-1082). Springer.

Theoharis, G., & Scanlan, M. (2015). *Leading for increasingly diverse schools*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315767574

United Nations. (1948). *Universal declaration of human rights*. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA]. (2017). *Population situation analysis of Nepal.* UNFPA: Kathmandu, Nepal.

Van Mieghem, A., Verschueren, K., Donche, V., & Struyf, E. (2020). Leadership as a lever for inclusive education in Flanders: A multiple case study using qualitative comparative analysis. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220953608

Vella, R. (2020). Leadership and women: The space between us. Narrating the stories of senior female educational leaders in Malta. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220929034

Wells, A. S., Fox, L., & Cordova-Cobo, D. (2016). How racially diverse schools and classrooms can benefit all students. *The Education Digest, 82*(1), 17. https://medium.com/the-century-foundation/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students-c8d7749f3fcd

Wilson, M. C. (2004). *Closing the leadership gap: Why women can and must help run the world*. Viking.

World Health Organisation (n.d.). *Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the virus that causes it.* https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6ᵗʰ ed.). Sage Publications.

About the author:

Shankar Dhakal, PhD, is an academic and educational researcher. With over 15 years of experience as a secondary principal, teacher trainer, and lecturer in tertiary institutions, he is actively engaged in multiple capacities within Australian higher education institutions. Dr Dhakal's research proficiency spans critical pedagogy, equitable and context-responsive school leadership, transformative educational research, and autoethnography.

E-mail: dhakals2070@gmail.com