

EXPRESSING VALUES AND FULFILLING OBLIGATIONS TO FAMILY THROUGH  
EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATION OF HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT  
EXPERIENCES & EXPECTATIONS IN SINDHUPALCHOWK, NEPAL

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Expressing Values and Fulfilling Obligations to Family Through Education: An Exploration of Higher Secondary School Student Experiences & Expectations in Sindhupalchowk, Nepal

Students in Nepal face numerous barriers in accessing and affording higher secondary schooling, yet many of their families prioritize education and send them on rural-to-urban pathways. While being uprooted from their home communities would presumably create conflicts between students' family and school responsibilities, this exploratory, qualitative research found that students view the value of education and family as synchronous and complimentary. Conducting remote, semi-structured interviews with participants from a rural subsistence-based community in Nepal found that students expressed the value of education as a vehicle to value their family and generate collective returns home. Conflicts arose for students to balance their responsibilities when the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmingly negatively impacted their education. Structural barriers, such as students' lack of social capital, also limited their abilities to realize the value of their education for their families. The value of family continues to strongly direct students' pathways even after higher secondary schooling.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADB – Asian Development Bank  
BPEP I - Basic Primary Education Project (1992–1997)  
BPEP II- Basic Primary Education Programme (1997–2002)  
CBS- Central Bureau for Statistics  
COVID-19- Coronavirus Disease (SARS-CoV-2)  
DCCO- District Coordination Committee Office  
DFID- Department for International Development (UK)  
DOE- Department of Education  
ECD/ECED- Early Childhood Education Development  
EFA- Education For All  
ESP- Education Sector Plan  
FY – Fiscal Year  
GDP- Gross Domestic Product  
INGO- International Non-Governmental Organization  
LCC- Learning Continuity Campaign  
LMIC- Low-Middle Income Country  
MDGs- Millennium Development Goals (2000- 2015)  
MIC – Middle Income Country  
MoE- Ministry of Education  
MoEST- Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology  
NESP- National Education System Plan (1971-1976)  
NNEPC- Nepal’s National Education Planning Commission  
NPC- National Planning Committee (Nepal)  
NPR- Nepalese Rupee  
OPHI- Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative  
PNS- King Prithvi Narayan Shah  
SAPs- Structural Adjustment Programs  
SDGs- Sustainable Development Goals (2016-2030)  
SEE – Secondary Education Exams  
SLC- School Leaving Certificate

SMC- School Management Committee

SSDP- School Sectoral Development Plan (2016-2023)

TFN- Teach for Nepal

TLC- Temporary Learning Center

UNDP- United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

US- United States

USAID- United States Agency for International Development

USOM – United States Operating Mission

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Education is often emphasized as a key component of social and economic upward mobility. The weight of education contains great promise and prestige but can also be accompanied by great costs and sacrifice. As someone who grew up attending public schooling in the United States (US) up until high school, I never questioned the access to my secondary education nor its value for me and my family. While my personal educational experience does not reflect the case for every student in the US, as there are thriving debates over inequitable educational opportunities by family background in the Global North (Chzhen, et al., 2018), I was first confronted with the unprocurable value of education in 2018 when I lived and taught English in a northern district in Nepal.

When I moved to a rural village in Sindhupalchowk district, I lived with a host family who lived a quite literal stone's throw away from the local government school. Every day I accompanied my three host siblings to school. But I soon realized that, unlike my own upbringing, my host siblings had many more responsibilities to their family. It was over the course of a year living in this rural village with my Nepali host family that I witnessed the integral role my host siblings played in their family outside of the school day. From early morning until evening my host siblings were expected to help make tea, cooked meals, assisted in the farming fields, cut grass for the livestock, washed dishes, and cleaned clothes, all while managing a full day at school --in other words, to be active contributors to the household and community. My host parents were oftentimes out of the home helping to rebuild houses in the village or completing farm work. Contrary to my expectations, my eldest host sister, Kriti, said she mostly enjoyed doing activities where she would be surrounded by other villagers in the community. While exhausting, these tasks were oftentimes done with another individual or in

larger groups with family, neighbors, or other community members. I, too, began to understand the sense of community that emerged from completing these home and farming tasks as I began to engage in the planting and harvesting seasons.

Over the course of a year, I realized Kriti was not only very sociable and hardworking but that she also excelled in her tenth-grade studies at school. Kriti sincerely enjoyed going to school and was incredibly bright, humble, and determined to do her very best. So, it was particularly devastating to hear her reckon with impossible hopes to continue her schooling past the 10th grade. There was no nearby school for her to finish her high school degree, nor did she know if she could score high enough on her 10th-grade exit exams to qualify for a scholarship to study in the city of Kathmandu. While my host family was extremely proud of Kriti's studies, they could not afford to send her to school to finish Grades 11 and 12 (or "10+2"). Her friends who would frequent my host family's home would also speak of dashed dreams or of the harrowing pathways ahead to try and complete their high school degree. It seemed egregiously wrong to me that students with such a deep desire to continue studying could be met with such inadequate options when I had not thought twice about the opportunity to get my high school degree. While this opened up my awareness of the differentiation of education opportunities globally and nationally in the US, I began to wonder about the costs and benefits of students pursuing their upper secondary education in Nepal. The lack of viable, nearby schools forced those who would complete 12<sup>th</sup> grade to migrate to Kathmandu or commute to the nearest village school more than one hour away, effectively extracting them from the family and community networks where they played such pivotal roles. Unfortunately, these challenges facing students coupled with their genuine desire to continue schooling are not uncommon dilemmas for other students in nearby



villages, districts, and provinces in Nepal, as there are many structural barriers to completing their high school degrees.

I stayed in close contact with Kriti even after I left Nepal and became invested in her decision to pursue her schooling after she received high scores on her 10<sup>th</sup> grade exit exams. She moved to Kathmandu and lived with extended family in the city to pursue her dreams of studying science in 10+2 schooling. However, when we would catch up, she would speak of missing home and village life. I understood how her absence could disrupt her family's subsistence farming dynamics, as well as her feelings of connection to her family and community. Then, one of the largest disruptions to education globally occurred in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic unfolded when Kriti was about to finish Class 11.

From 2020 to 2022, many students who had migrated to the city for 10+2 schooling returned home to the village intermittently as school closures in Nepal totaled more than 18 months (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Navigating online schooling from the village created yet another impediment for those students who had already “beaten the odds” and found a way to pursue 10+2 education, such as my host sister. I grew curious about how students felt about returning to their home environments while navigating 10+2 schooling, as this was not a foreseeable opportunity for many before the pandemic. I intended to research the dilemmas students faced in juggling home and school responsibilities and pursuing limited 10+2 schooling options, with a wider focus on the shortcomings in the upper secondary schooling system under the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal.

Through this research I hoped to uncover greater insight from both students and their home communities about how they managed their responsibilities to their education and their families. While migration studies in South Asia is quite well-researched, the emotional migratory

journeys of students in Nepal are still relatively unexplored. At the time of this writing, just one study has identified the cultural and emotional changes for Himalayan children who go through long-term rural to urban migration in Nepal (Khan, 2018). I wished to explore how higher secondary students' relationships with their home communities affected their studies and, alternatively, how their pathways toward higher education impacted their relationships at home. I hoped the findings of this research would allow for more viable opportunities for students to continue their studies and reap the benefits of their education, as Nepali youth hold a great amount of potential to enact positive change in Nepal. Since the rationale for this study was grounded in my previous relationships to students in this village in Nepal, my identity as a familiar foreigner directed my interactions with research participants.

### **Positionality**

Although conducted virtually, my research was focused on this village community where I had taught previously. I therefore came into this research project as a known entity who had served in the past as an American-English teacher in this community. Neutrality in contact-based, qualitative research is difficult to achieve (Holmes, 2021), so it is necessary to highlight the effects of my identity and how it shaped my interactions within this community.

While my familiarity with this community conferred benefits of allowing me to conduct research remotely and inquire about participants' social relationships, there are elements of this familiarity that presented ethical dilemmas. Being an American foreigner and a teacher added layers of power imbalance in my position as a researcher. Teachers are generally viewed with great importance and respect in Nepal (although the extent of this deference can differ based on gender, ethnic group, and caste). Though I asked my host parents not to call me "miss" when I lived in the village, this title remained with me outside of the school grounds and inherently

demanded higher respect. Coupled with my identity as a native English-speaker and foreigner, I received quite a bit of unearned respect as an English teacher in this community. My new role as a researcher also could have been a source of confusion or uncertainty for participants who previously knew me as a foreign teacher in the village. Lastly, it is also the case that my personal and emotional investment in this research site allowed for more honest discussion with participants yet meant that my analysis was not entirely impartial. In Chapter 3, I elaborate further on what doors were opened or shut as a result of my positionality. Despite some of these drawbacks, I believe my familiarity with students and sustained connection with individuals from this community ultimately facilitated meaningful conversations in this research.

### **Research Questions**

With this research, I sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do upper secondary school students' social relationships with their families and communities affect their educational experiences in Nepal during the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - a) What have upper secondary school student experiences been like studying away from or while living with their families?
    - i. How are students affected by their responsibilities to their families and their schoolwork?
  - b) How have upper secondary school students' experiences and responsibilities changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
    - i. In the changing school environments students experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, what has been most and least supportive of their educational pathways?
    - ii. What has been most and least supportive of their family relationships?

c) What do upper secondary school teachers, parents of students, and village community members believe are the largest changes to responsibilities and experiences of 10+2 students due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- i. What do they believe is most supportive of 10+2 students' educational pathways and family relationships?

### **Thesis Outline**

As I will elaborate throughout this thesis, the themes that emerged from this research pivoted my view of family and school responsibilities as disparate and in conflict to a deeper analysis of family and schooling values. In this introduction I have outlined how I arrived at this research project and how fundamental my positionality is to understand my data collection and analysis. In Chapter 2 I will provide historical background on Nepal and the 10+2 education system. I will describe my methods and research site in Chapter 3 followed by a description of my participants and family values in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 I will outline how my initial expectation of finding conflict in student responsibilities to schooling and family was disproved. I will consult the changes to schooling posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications in Chapter 6, followed by an exploration of the structural barriers that face students once they finish 10+2 schooling in Chapter 7. In Chapter 8 I will conclude with recommendations for policymakers and the prospects posed by the advent of a new 10+2 school in the village area.

## CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

The pursuit of education as a pathway toward social and economic mobility is not unique to the case of Nepal. However, Nepal's historical, political, social, and cultural landscape frames a distinct set of tensions and circumstances for students pursuing higher secondary schooling in Nepal. In this chapter, I will provide a brief background on Nepal and its economy before delving into a detailed history of its education system. This will contextualize perceptions and sentiments surrounding modernity and upward mobility, development, and education in Nepal, as well as global parallels in comparative education. I then describe general family composition and structure in Nepal to explore how higher secondary students' social relationships are understood. I end by highlighting the specific barriers facing 10+2 students and their families, especially as they are situated in the global COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Nepal as a Nation**

Nepal contains a vast diversity of geography and peoples (CIA, 2022). For only being 147,181 square kilometers in area, roughly the size of the state of New York in the United States, Nepal's climate varies from subtropical in the lowlands to high-altitude in the Himalayas. Nepal is home to Mt. Everest (*Sagaramāthā*) and several of the other tallest mountains in the world. River plains called the Terai (*Tarā'ī*) share a southern border with India as the Himalayan foothills roll through the center of Nepal. Nepal is prone to natural disasters and extreme weather events from seismic activities in the Himalayas and monsoon seasons in temperate areas. Across Nepal's diverse landscape there are 126 different indigenous ethnic groups or *janajati* (*janajātī*) and castes (*jāt*), and 123 different languages spoken (CBS, 2012). Nepal's diversity has not always existed in harmony, however, as the nation of Nepal has been through many periods of political upheaval that have left marginalized groups behind.

Nepal was united as a nation-state in 1768 under the rule of King Prithvi Narayan Shah (PNS) of the Gorkha kingdom. Unlike most other territories in South Asia, such as India and occupied Tibet, Nepal was not colonized by Europeans or China. After occupying eastern Nepal and the Kathmandu Valley PNS declared four castes (*varnas*) and thirty-six ethnic groups in the newly unified kingdom of Nepal (Whelpton, 2005; Bista, 1991). The Shah dynasty's political power was diluted in 1846 when the Rana familial line instated a hereditary, Prime Minister-led autocracy in Nepal. The Rana rule asserted elitism, nepotism, and isolationism in Nepal for more than a century, which included depriving the wider Nepalese public of education (Skinner & Holland, 1996) with lasting effects for decades to follow. Although Nepal was largely isolated from global dynamics during Rana rule, economic relations with British India were strengthened in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Rana regime was overthrown in 1950 and waves of democracy and party-less democracy (*Panchayat*) followed all while the presence of a powerful monarch still existed in Nepal (Bista, 1991). Finally, after a decade-long Maoist civil war from 1996 to 2006 that claimed more than 20,000 lives (Singh, 2004) Nepal officially abolished its monarchy and declared a secular, Federal Democratic Republic in 2008 (MoEST, 2018).

These political periods of centralization, decentralization, globalization, civil conflict, and democratization had enormous effects on the management of education in the country as administrative delineations and management responsibilities varied. Nepal has now been divided administratively into seven provinces and 77 different districts since 2015. Subdivisions of these districts into local governments are designated as metropolitan, sub-metropolitan, municipality (*nagarapālikā*), and rural municipality (*gā'umṣpālikā*). Within these local governments there are local government wards, which are now the lowest administrative governing level since the Constitution was enacted in 2015 (MoEST, 2021). Since my research and analysis reflect on

various historical moments in Nepal, I will present these varying delineations of administrative divisions in Nepal in reporting statistics and figures.

### **Nepal's Economy and Population**

In mid-2020 Nepal graduated to a low-middle income country (LMIC) from low-income country status (Bhattarai & Subedi, 2021). There have been other points of progress in Nepal's development, as the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line declined from 42% in 1990 to 21.6% by 2015 (NPC, 2016). This improvement was on track with the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and was attributed to urbanization, bolstering of the private sector and civil society, production of information and communication technology, and remittances (NPC, 2016). In fact, for the past two decades much of Nepal's rural households' investments in education, health, and land were made possible through remittances (Bhattarai & Subedi, 2021). Current statistics show that around one-fifth of Nepal's population is living abroad (ADB, 2022). However, there have been shifts in the measurement of poverty and its occurrence across different ethnic groups, castes, and geographical locations. In 2019 it was found that 17.5% of Nepal's population still lives in multi-dimensional poverty<sup>1</sup> (UNDP & OPHI, 2021). This indicates that there are large discrepancies in access to quality healthcare, education, and basic standards of living across Nepal. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, existing inequality and job market instability have been magnified (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021).

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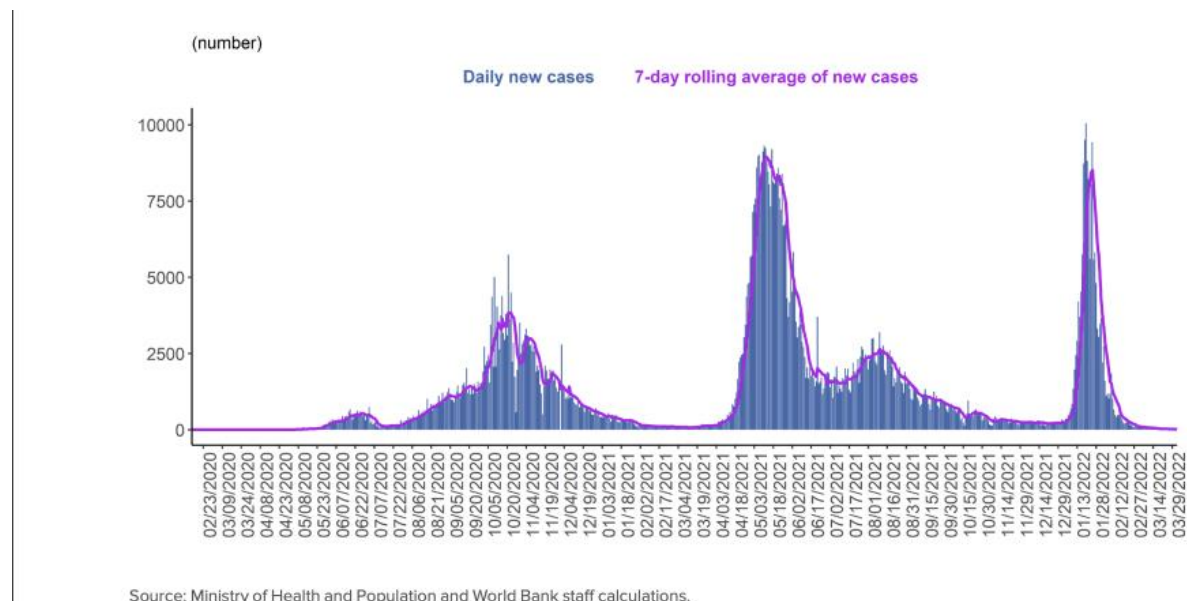
<sup>1</sup> The Multidimensional Poverty Index is a measurement of multiple deprivations across three dimensions: health, education, and standards of living. It measures 10 indicators including nutrition, child mortality, years of schooling, school attendance, cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing, and assets (UNDP & OPHI, 2021, p. 2).

## Nepal's Economy

In 2020, Nepal's economy relied mainly on remittances and agriculture (including forestry and fishing), which accounted for 24.1% and 23.1% of Nepal's GDP respectively (The World Bank, 2022a; The World Bank, 2022b). Services accounted for the remainder of Nepal's GDP at 53.3%, including wholesale and retail sales, transport, education and health services, and other industries in the country<sup>2</sup> (The World Bank, 2022c). The COVID-19 pandemic contracted Nepal's GDP in 2020 by 2.1% (ADB, 2022). Although this rate is better than the 4.5% GDP contraction in the entire South Asia region (The World Bank, 2022d), the continuous waves of COVID-19 variants led to repetitive government lockdowns to control cases in the country, affecting Nepal's industries (The World Bank Group, 2022). Increases in COVID-19 cases associated with the 2021 Delta and 2022 Omicron variants can be seen in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2. 1**

### *Daily and Weekly COVID-19 Cases in Nepal from March 2020 to 2022*



Adapted from: *Nepal Development Update: Global Challenges and Domestic Revival* (p. 2), The World Bank Group, 2021, The World Bank Group

<sup>2</sup> This data from The World Bank is derived from a chart covering annual data from 1965-2020.

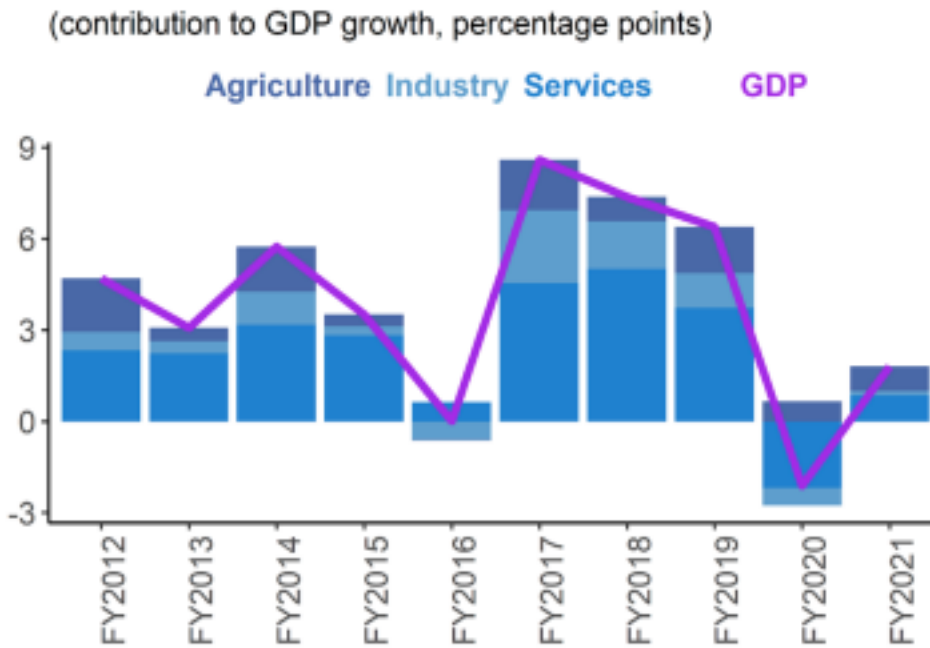


<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099835004122242158/P1774360498cd407a09a4d0e5860fd8fc84>

Preliminary economic reports for Nepal released in April 2022 show Nepal’s economy has improved in the 2021 fiscal year (FY), although not to pre-pandemic levels (The World Bank Group, 2022). This is illustrated in Figure 2.2, where services and industry contributions to GDP growth shrank from FY 2020 to 2021. Remittances were also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they declined in FY 2020. Although remittance inflows improved in FY 2021, these levels have already declined again in FY 2022 (The World Bank Group, 2022).

**Figure 2. 2**

*Tracking Nepal’s Overall GDP and Contribution to GDP growth from FY2012 to FY2021*



Sources: Central Bureau of Statistics and World Bank staff calculations.

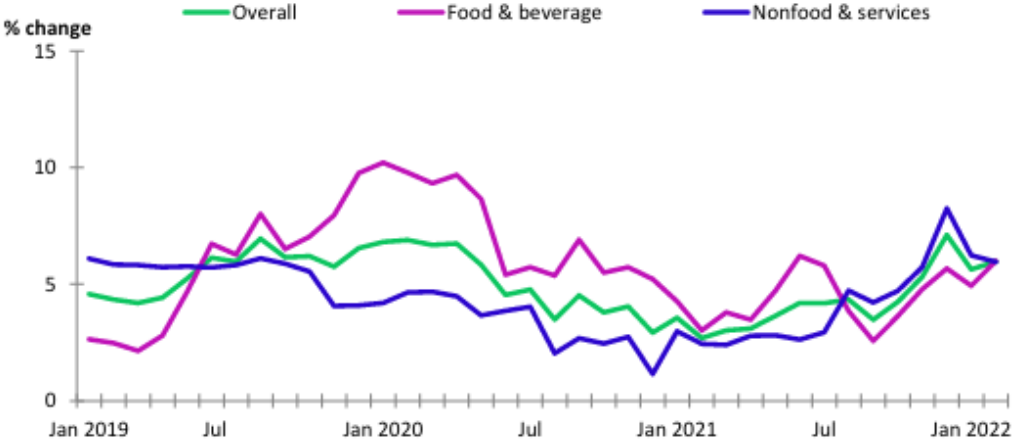
Adapted from: *Nepal Development Update: Global Challenges and Domestic Revival* (p. 3), The World Bank Group, 2022, The World Bank Group.

<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099835004122242158/P1774360498cd407a09a4d0e5860fd8fc84>

Inflation, high rates of unemployment, and a lack of stability in service industries domestically and abroad has increased everyday uncertainty for people in Nepal. (ADB, 2022; The World Bank Group, 2022). Inflation has risen and fallen over the course of the pandemic but accelerated in FY 2022 with the increase of nonfood inflation (see Figure 2.3). This is attributed to the increase in global oil prices and rising costs of education fees and housing (The World Bank Group, 2022).

**Figure 2. 3**

*Monthly Inflation Changes in Nepal from January 2019-2022*



Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021. National Accounts of Nepal 2020/21. <http://cbs.gov.np/> and staff estimates

*Nepal Macroeconomic Update* (p. 2), Asian Development Bank, 2022, Asian Development Bank Nepal Resident Mission, Volume 10, No.1. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/786571/nepal-macroeconomic-update-202204.pdf>

*Nepal’s Population*

Nepal is an incredibly diverse nation in terms of landscape and people; however, there are various economic, social, and cultural divisions that contribute to unequal access to the education system. According to 2021 census data, Nepal’s population has grown only 0.93% since 2011 (CBS, 2022b). This is the lowest growth rate observed in the past 80 years in Nepal and is attributable to the high rates of migration (CBS, 2022a). Nepal’s total population is just

over 29 million people with an absentee population of 2,169,478 individuals (CBS, 2022b), which refers to absent individuals from the household who have gone abroad six months prior to the census date (CBS, 2014). Data have yet to be released regarding demographics, employment, and education levels from the 2021 census, so the following data come from the 2011 census.

Despite Nepal's religious diversity, it was known as a Hindu state from the reign of the Ranas up until monarchical rule was dissolved in Nepal in 2008. Now a secular state, 81% of the population of Nepal reported following Hinduism in 2011, 9% practiced Buddhism, followed by Islam (4.4%), and Christianity (1.4%)<sup>3</sup> (CBS, 2012). The existence of both Buddhism and Hinduism tradition in Nepal and the movement away from such clear delineation between religion has been advocated for considering the shared cultural and religious background of many groups in Nepal (Whelpton, 2005).

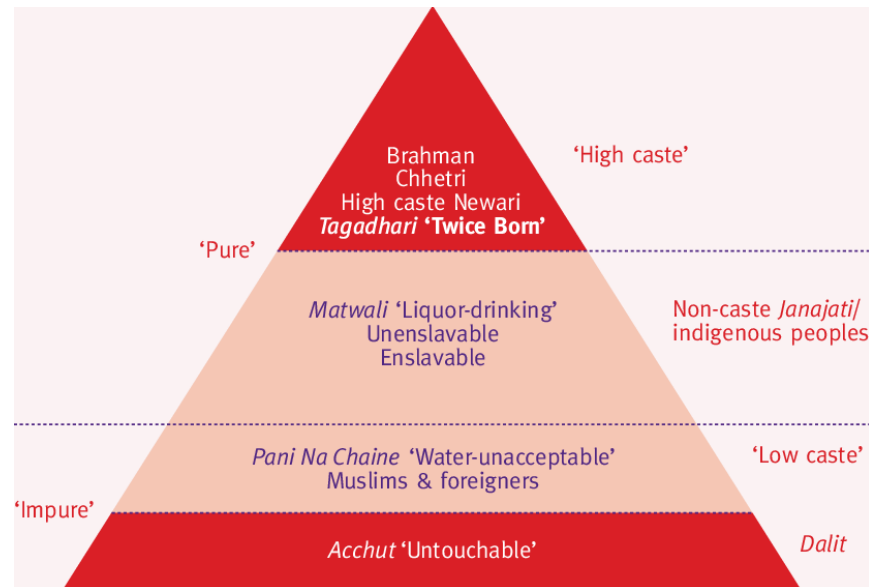
The Nepali term *jāt*, which means “caste” in the Hindu tradition, is sometimes used colloquially to refer to one's descent group, indicating that the distinction between caste and ethnic group is considered fluid (Whelpton, 2005). In this way, ethnic groups are integrated into the caste system in Nepal. The caste system as a social hierarchal system was codified into law in Nepal under the Rana rule in 1854 with the *Mulukī Ain* (Nation's Code), although the caste system loosely existed since Nepal was unified (Neupane, 2017). The *Muluki Ain* codified caste into a system (see Figure 2.4) that incorporated non-Hindu ethnic and religious groups that were otherwise outside of the caste system (Kabeer, 2010). In Nepal, the caste system recognizes four *varnas* or castes that individuals are born into, and which dictates many aspects of one's life and treatment in society (Bista, 1991). The Brahman and Chhetri represent alleged high castes who are considered ‘pure’,

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<sup>3</sup> Other religions include Prakriti (0.5%; 121,982), Bon (13,006), Jainism (3,214), Bahai (1,283) and Sikhism (609) (CBS, 2012, p. 4).

**Figure 2. 4**

*The Caste Hierarchy in Nepal Based on the 'Muluki Ain'*



Note: The area of each slice in the pyramid does not correspond to population size. Adapted from: “Can the MDGs Provide a Pathway to Social Justice? The Challenge of Intersecting Inequalities” by N. Kabeer, 2010, *Institute of Development Studies*.

whereas *matwali* and *janajati* ethnic groups (who do not have a caste) are regarded as ‘liquor-drinking’, and then otherwise ‘enslavable’ or ‘unenslavable.’ Those of low caste were designated as Muslims, foreigners, and ‘water-unacceptable’ members in the caste system. Dalits (formerly referred to as “untouchable,” a term now considered an epithet), are the lowest caste group and are considered ritually impure. Dalit groups have historically experienced discrimination and structural violence due to their low caste and deeply engrained norms associated with their low position in society (Kabeer, 2010). Even though discrimination based on caste and “untouchability” were declared illegal more than fifty years ago (DFID Nepal & The World Bank, 2006), caste-based discrimination still permeates society, including in schools and against ethnic group minorities.

**Table 2. 1***Division of Nepal's Population by Ethnicity and Caste at the Time of the 2011 Census*

<b>Ethnicity/Caste</b>	<b>Percent of Population</b>
Chhetri	16.6
Brahman-Hill	12.2
Magar	7.1
Tharu	6.6
Tamang	5.8
Newar	5
Kami	4.8
Musalman	4.4
Yadav	4
Rai	2.3

Data derived from: *National Population and Housing Census 2011 (National Report)* (p. 4), Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012, Government of Nepal National Planning Commission Secretariat, Volume 1. <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/documents/Nepal/Nepal-Census-2011-Vol1.pdf>

Chhetri people accounted for the highest percentage of Nepal's population in 2011 (see Table 2.1), which represented barely over 16% of the population. The vast diversity of Nepal's population can be underrepresented in statistics and data enumeration, especially regarding ethnicity and mother-tongue language (Subedi, 2021; Pradhan, 2020). These problems extend to the education system in Nepal, as language of instruction and discrimination have been identified as one of many drivers of disparity in learning in Nepal (MoEST, 2021).

### *Tamang Population*

Tamang describes one of the *janaajati* ethnic groups and their mother tongue in Nepal. Tamang people are thought to have descended from the Himalayas near Tibet (Tibeto-Burman ancestry) and are mainly concentrated around Kathmandu and in eastern and western Nepal. Although the rites, rituals, and dialects of Tamang language can differ across communities,

Tamang communities generally follow Buddhism and a patrilineal clan system without a hierarchy (Holmberg, 1989). As the *Muluki Ain* incorporated ethnic groups into the legal procedure for social and economic code, Tamang people were considered ‘enslavable’ (see Figure 2.4) and the lowest in the category of hill ethnic groups. Historically, Tamang communities have been marginalized in Nepal as bonded laborers for rulers, and women used in trafficking and concubine practices (Shyangtan, 2020). Students who grow up speaking Tamang language in their household may be disadvantaged in schools where Nepali (and sometimes English) is the dominant medium of instruction (Shyangtan, 2020). These structural and social forms of marginalization impact Tamang students across Nepal today (Shyangtan, 2020).

Anthropologist Katherine March (2002) describes that Tamang households “aspire to being multigenerational, patrilineal, patrilocal families (p. 144).” Tamang households are also described as interdependent with greater gender complementarity, family clan systems that engage in grueling farm work, and display dynamics where children are integrated and essential members of their family and community (March, 2002). Hence, collectivist orientations are present in some Tamang communities.

This general background on Nepal as a nation is nowhere near comprehensive; rather, it is meant to frame Nepal’s economy and society as it relates to the community involved in this research. There are various compounding factors (such as caste) that serve to influence and differentiate students’ experiences through higher secondary schooling in Nepal. Although they were not all at the foreground of this research, they are still imperative to consult in understanding the student experiences documented in this research under Nepal’s education system. Next, I will provide an in-depth assessment of the history of Nepal’s education system to

contextualize the issues facing 10+2 students specifically, and how these arise from Nepal's complex political history.

### **History of Nepal's Education System**

When considering that the national education system in Nepal was only established after 1950, where only 300 students finished high school each year (Pandey et al., 1956), there has been significant progress. However, there are lasting issues in the functioning and equity of Nepal's education system that have emerged through its political and social history, as well as the influence of foreign development.

The Rana oligarchy (1846-1950) reigned in Nepal for over one century, over the course of which Nepal only saw a 0.9 percent growth in primary school enrollment for 6- 10-year-olds (Sharma, 1990). The Ranas first only allowed education for the political elite, or those with family or caste connections with the regime (Caddell, 2007). The Durbar School was the first private school institution established in 1854 that was exclusively for Ranas and those with social or political connections to the regime. The Durbar School opened to the middle-class public in 1902, where those that could afford it attended for a prestigious education or otherwise went to India for higher education (Pradhan, 2018). Although 200 schools (and one tertiary institution) were also established during the Rana regime that offered Nepali-medium instruction, *janajati*, low caste, and other marginalized groups in Nepal were largely excluded. As a result, by 1950 the literacy rate was under 5% and there were less than 330 schools established in the entire country (Whelpton, 2005; Gurung, 2012).

When the Rana oligarchical rule ended in 1951, education was viewed as a way for youth to contribute to the new Nepali nation through ideals of 'development.' While defining 'development' itself is a highly debated topic, in the case of Nepal during the 1950s it rested on

Western knowledge systems through the influence of development aid in the country (Timsina, 2020). As Nepal began to establish a national education system to support the large number of new schools opening, the nation received guidance from the former United States Operations Mission (USOM), which would eventually evolve into the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID (Caddell, 2007). Hugh B. Wood, a University of Oregon professor, was a key representative from USOM who advised Nepal to develop its education system so it would keep up, “...with the modern progress of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Timsina, 2020, p.155). Wood worked with Nepal’s National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC), which was established in 1954 to develop Nepal’s uniform education system (Caddell, 2007; Gurung, 2012). Based on a survey of the country’s needs, the NNEPC recognized the urgency of implementing universal education, since “democracy cannot flourish in a country where 98% of the people are illiterate. ...Illiteracy is wastage; people continue in their old ways, knowing nothing of the advances made elsewhere, the better life that could be had through knowledge of improved methods, facilities, and ideas” (Pandey et al., 1956). The NNEPC’s first few education plans included lofty goals aimed at eventual universal education, such as implementing five years of universal primary education within the first 25 years of the program, improving multipurpose high school education, higher education, and adult literacy rates (Pandey et al., 1956; Gurung, 2012). However, continuous shifts in politics and priorities in Nepal led these goals to remain largely unrealized.

As an advisor to the NNEPC, Wood supported the establishment of Nepali medium instruction in schools (Caddell, 2007). A decade later, with the shift to the Panchayat system (1960-1989), Nepali was officially declared the national language in schools (Pradhan, 2016). This happened alongside increasing Hindu nationalism and a high-level rejection of



multiculturalism in favor of the ideology “one king, one language, one dress, one country” (Pradhan, 2020). The narrative of development shifted as Nepali nationalism pulsed throughout the education system under the Panchayat system, and textbook materials painted an idyllic Nepal developed by its dedicated and productive citizens (Pigg, 1992; Timsina, 2020). Education textbooks problematically characterized villages as backward, and lower-caste and non-Hindu groups as inferior compared with the comfortable lifestyles of high caste, Kathmandu-dwelling citizens of the Hindu state (Caddell, 2007). Even credit hours for English classes in schools were decreased in an effort to preserve the homogeneity of a Nepali education through Nepali medium instruction (Pradhan, 2020). Considering the number of languages spoken in Nepal, the curriculum disadvantaged from the start those Nepalis who did not grow up speaking Nepali as a first language at home, particularly those from minority ethnic groups and those in poorer or more rural locations (Gurung, 2012). In this way, geographical location and level of urbanization became correlated with the quality of education. Beyond nationalistic priorities, ideals of economizing education to generate a higher-skilled workforce in Nepal were also woven into education policy that posed issues to progression.

The National Education System Plan (NESP, 1971-1976) was launched in 1971 with an explicit attempt to help advance the country’s economic development goals. Alongside goals to establish a centralized primary education system were the goals to develop skilled manpower out of youth engaged in higher education (which at the time was considered Grade 11 and higher) (Gurung, 2012). Even before this, at the onset of building Nepal’s education system, UNESCO and USOM rationalized educating the youth of Nepal as an economically valuable strategy, but one that needed to be limited to avoid overspending. Wood agreed with UNESCO’s proposal to curb the pass rates from secondary school to higher education to 5%, reduce Nepal’s spending on

higher education (which at the time was 20%), and lower college enrollment from 5,000 to 3,500 students (Wood, 1959; Wood, 1965). Technical and financial assistance from USOM promoted vocational schooling over secondary and higher education (Wood, 1959). Raising the qualifications to enter tertiary education and reshuffling focus to vocational schooling aimed to optimize the economic pathways for students. The few students who did reach higher education mainly entered arts courses (Whelpton, 2005), and since this was not considered a gateway to improving the economy, the NNEPC strategically failed 80% of arts and commerce majors to encourage students to seek education in the vocational sector instead (Caddell, 2007). However, protests unfolded in the 1970s as angered Nepali students resisted these changes to the education system for its empty prospects of employment opportunities (Whelpton, 2005). Other criticisms of the diminishing quality of education extend to the early beginnings of Nepal's education system for being purely focused on infrastructure with little foresight to factors contributing to the quality of education, such as teacher training or transferability of skills (Ragsdale, 1989). As students went through the schooling system and failed to achieve their aspirations, they were also burdened with expectations from their families that accompanied the ideals that education would lead to transformation from the "traditional."

As Nepal emerged from public suppression caused by the Rana rule and the extreme nationalism of the Panchayat system, education became viewed as an even clearer avenue toward new forms of knowledge (Skinner & Holland, 1996). The concept of an 'educated person' was explored in an extensive study by researchers Skinner & Holland (1996) who found that education was associated with development and economic advancement in a rural village. Students drew a distinction between their ways of thinking and the knowledge of older generations, and parents and grandparents viewed being uneducated as a form of "blindness"

(Skinner & Holland, 1996). Whereas this motivated parents to send their children to school, it also problematically made students' home communities appear "backward," and promoted the value of school solely as an avenue into modernization and economic growth (Carnoy, 1974). This problematic dichotomy between the "traditional" and the "modern" is not isolated to the case of Nepal nor the realm of education, as these divisions have been observed in neighboring India. In the case of India, perceptions of "modernity" as necessary social and economic change was deeply influenced by British colonial capitalism. However, the dichotomy between tradition and modern has been rejected in the case of India, as the preservation of the "traditional" has existed alongside Western ideals of modernization, especially in the case of women's social roles and practices (Radhakrishnan, 2011; Weaver, 2018). As Nepal remained uncolonized, it has been the influence of nationalism and foreign aid that have contributed to ideologies of education as a form of upward mobility and economic advancement that have combined both Western standards for "modernity" and Nepali conceptions of development (Pigg, 1992). Further discourse on modernity as it applies to Nepal's education system will follow in this section.

Privatization and restrictions on spending at the secondary schooling level were initiatives led by foreign aid influence that still impact Nepal's education system today. The World Bank's presence in Nepal's economic development began in the 1970s but became more involved in Nepal's primary and secondary education system in the 1980s and 1990s. In the case of Nepal, the World Bank's structural adjustment programs (SAPs) involved spending cuts to health and education to prioritize repaying debts to the World Bank, limiting the role of the Government of Nepal's Ministry of Education (MOE), and decentralizing management of schools to the local level (Regmi, 2016). School management committees (SMCs) organized parents and community members to manage schools at the local level, however, they were poorly

developed and insufficiently implemented by the World Bank with little notice to the context of Nepali communities. Perhaps even more problematic at this time were the provisions for privatization from the World Bank that discouraged providing free basic education for the fear that it was leading to lacking quality education. While quality was in fact a pressing issue, the World Bank suggested:

“Although secondary education already suffers from major problems of quality, efficiency and equity which are not being adequately addressed, the Government is further compounding these difficulties with the introduction of the free secondary education policy in the face of continuing resource constraints. (World Bank 1994, vi)” (Regmi, 2016, p. 7).

To address this issue, an influx of for-profit private schools using English-medium instruction during the 1990s began shifting the public perception of education toward valuing private English-medium instruction over public Nepali-medium instruction. Since private schools were also unregulated by the government, they were able to charge higher tuition (A. Thapa, 2013). Scholars have argued that privatization in the 1990s demonstrated the commodification of education. Those attending higher-tuition, English-medium, private schools were viewed as better poised to succeed because of their association with elite academic qualifications. One’s education became increasingly indicative of their family’s economic standing (Liechty, 2003; Nikku, 2020). Nearly 80% of schools in Kathmandu district are private today (Nikku, 2020), and these disparities in quality of schooling and the affordability of education are still present in Nepal’s schools.

Although strides were made to improve physical school infrastructure and enrollment in the decades since 1950, there were still deepening disparities for marginalized and underrepresented groups. The Communist Party’s dissatisfaction with these inequalities culminated in a decade of civil conflict from 1996 to 2006 called the ‘People’s War’ or ‘Maoist

War.’ Resistance was mainly intended to pressure the government to address inequalities along caste, ethnic group, and socioeconomic lines, where Maoist sentiment spread that, “The national education system either fell short in addressing these huge structural problems or played a complicit role in reinforcing inequalities by excluding certain social groups from the national development process” (Pherali, 2013, p. 52). Maoist insurgencies targeted attacks on schools as symbols of the abuse of state control or Western influence, as they were seen as sources of social exclusion (Pherali, 2013; Pradhan, 2018) The Maoist conflict disrupted schooling with periods of school closures and child soldier recruitment through schools, which made some parents wary to send their children to school (Hart, 2001). The lasting effects of the Maoist conflict continued to allow politicization of the management of schools at the local level even after the civil war ended and the country shifted to a secular federal democracy (Pherali, 2013).

In 2015 Nepal established its first Constitution and Parliament as a Federal Democratic Republic. The new federal democratic system established three branches of governance: national, seven provincial, and 753 local governments where power was concentrated at the very local level (MoEST, 2021; Acharya, 2018). Despite the periods of instability during the decade of the People’s War, Nepal’s net enrollment rate in primary education was able to grow from 64% in 1990 to 96.6% in 2015. Literacy rates of 15- to 24-year-olds soared to 88.6% from 38% in 1990 and retention in schooling through Grade 5 more than doubled to 89.4% (NPC, 2016). At the turn of the century, Nepal had joined global efforts toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000-2015). The MDGs were a set of eight development goals aimed at reducing global poverty and Nepal made progress toward several of them, as absolute poverty rates halved, and the country almost achieved universal primary education (MoE, 2016). The MDG of reaching universal primary education emphasized the power of formal education,

as it correlated individual education achievement with national growth, which is not dissimilar to the nationalistic education agenda during the Panchayat era. This association of education with economic payoffs and national development has arguably heightened expectations and pressures accompanying pursuits of formal education in Nepal and globally (Valentin, 2011). Many other critiques emerged around the fact that the MDGs were largely unmet globally and had done nothing to address persistent inequalities in quality education and disadvantaged opportunities for baseline access to education for marginalized or socially or physically isolated student groups (Nelson, 2021).

Compounding these continued disparities was a 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25th, 2015, which wreaked damage across the country. Close to 9,000 people died in the earthquake and subsequent aftershocks, and more than 500,000 homes were destroyed (Sapkota & Neupane, 2021). One year after the earthquake about 70% of Nepal's displaced population (approximately 2 million people) were still in temporary living shelters (Reid, 2018; Sapkota & Neupane, 2021). The earthquake destroyed 9,353 schools in Nepal and damaged countless others (MoE, 2016). In response to the long-term recovery measures necessary to respond to this natural disaster, Nepal began a "build back better" initiative behind reconstructing schools to be resilient to natural disasters (MoE, 2016). Resilience became a large component of Nepal's development plan agenda moving forward, as well as addressing equality in education.

While a more current Education Sector Plan (ESP) is in the pipeline of Nepal's Ministry of Education, its most recent School Sectoral Development Plan (SSDP, 2016-2023) was created to build more inclusive and relevant quality education for students across Nepal (MoE, 2016).

The SSDP came at the time that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2016-2030) were established to reorient global goals from the shortcomings of the MDGs, with SDG Goal 4 aimed at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education (Nelson, 2021; United Nations, 2022b). However, there are large gaps to fill with these initiatives in Nepal. The largest factors leading to inequality in Nepal's fifteen districts with the lowest scores on the Equity Index<sup>4</sup> were attributed to ethnicity, location, and gender (MoEST, 2021). Even though basic education was declared a human right in 2015 and constituted as free and compulsory, national household data has highlighted income as a limiting factor in enrollment in Early Childhood Education Development (ECED) (MoEST, 2021). Hence, some policy-level changes are still yet to affect students' equal access to schooling, as affordability becomes an increasingly relevant determinant of access and quality of schooling. These issues are not limited to the case of Nepal, but rather exist across global school systems, including the United States. Income inequality drives huge disparities in both education opportunities and post-schooling employment opportunities in the US (Isaacs et al., 2008). Unfortunately, there was little time for the world to progress toward greater equality in education and SDG Goal 4 before the COVID-19 pandemic appeared in early 2020. Before delving into the current issues in the education system in Nepal and the world at the onset and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I will describe the structure of Nepal's education system at the time I conducted this research.

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<sup>4</sup> The Equity Index is computed annually and, "uses household and school-based data on gender, geography, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and caste, and disability to measure and rank prevalence and severity of disparity in education outcomes" (MoEST, 2021, p. 43).

## Nepal’s Current Education Structure

Under Nepal’s new federal republic structure, management of public schooling is now under the purview of local governments while the federal government oversees policy and general sectoral services. Since 2016, the schooling system in Nepal has been redefined into basic and secondary schooling and broken up into the following grade levels as outlined in Table 2.2. With the addition of the Free and Compulsory Education Act from Parliament in 2018, both basic and secondary education is considered “free” and basic education is also compulsory under the provision of recognizing education as a human right (MoEST, 2021).

**Table 2. 2**

*Nepal’s Education System Before and After 2016*

<b>Pre-2016 Education System</b>		
	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Grades</b>
	Pre-Primary Education (PPE)	-
	Primary	Grades 1-5
	Lower Secondary	Grades 6-8
	Secondary	Grades 9-10
	Higher Secondary	Grades 11-12
<b>Post-2016 Education System</b>		
<b>Overall Level</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Grades</b>
Basic	ECED/PPE	-
	Lower Basic	Grades 1-5
	Upper Basic	Grades 6-8
Secondary	Lower Secondary	Grades 9-10
	Upper Secondary	Grades 11-12



Data derived from: “Nepal: Education Sector Analysis 2021 (2078 BS),” by MoEST, 2021, *Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology*, p. 31.

In Table 2.2 the post-2016 upper secondary schooling refers to Grades 9-12, however, in the past secondary schooling only applied to Grades 9 and 10. The disaggregation of Grades 11 and 12 in data has thus not been a smooth nor clear process. I may refer to Grades 11 and 12 as higher secondary or upper secondary schooling, as they have remained interchangeable throughout the changes to the education system. Higher secondary schools are oftentimes called “colleges,” which should not be confused with universities, or Bachelor’s level institutions. More informal delineation of these two years of high school have defined it as “10+2” schooling, “Plus 2,” or “SLC level,” the latter being a term used in 2011 census data.

Schools in Nepal are also classified as being public, private, or religious schools.<sup>5</sup> Public schools are also sometimes referred to as government or community schools and are supported by the government, whereas private (or institutional) schools are managed by parents and trustees (MoEST, 2021). As detailed prior, private schools in Nepal have historically been believed to be associated with better academic standards, higher tuition, and English-medium instruction (Nikku, 2020). While there has been a long debate over the disparities between private and public schooling in Nepal, I do not analyze the influence of these factors in students’ experiences because my research includes students who attended both public and private schools. However, this does not discount the occurrence of such discrepancies between private and public schooling.

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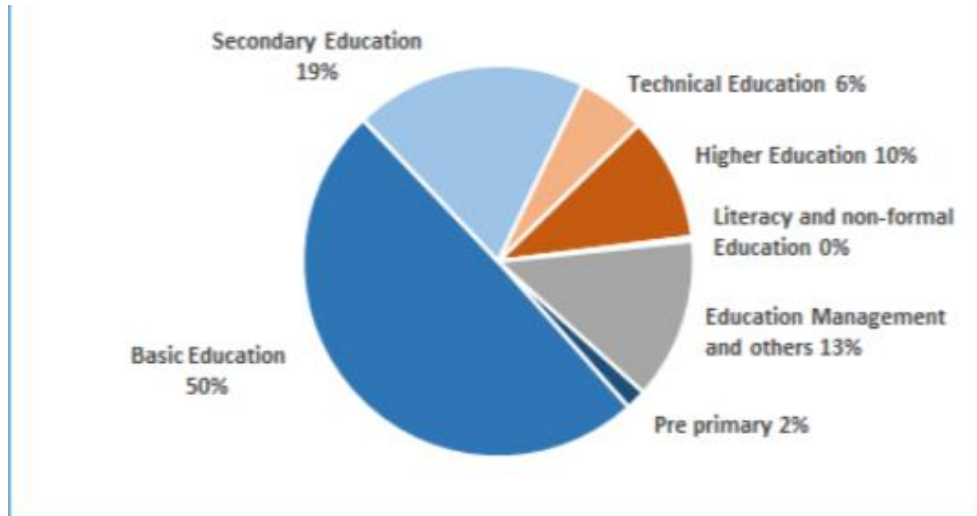
<sup>5</sup> Religious schools support Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim practices and were not included in the realm of my research.

### *Education Budget Financing*

Nepal's recent transition to a Federal Republic means budget management has shifted mainly to the local government level. A look at Nepal's education budget allocation sheds light on issues of affordability and educational expenses facing students. Nepal's total expenditure on education is lower than UNESCO's set international standard of 20%, as in the 2020/2021 fiscal year 13.7% of Nepal's total government budget was spent on education (MoEST, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Nepal's education budget represents just 11.7% of its national budget (MoEST, 2021) and general trends have indicated that in the decade since 2009/10 external financing has increased, government funding has decreased marginally, and household funding of education has increased. The federal government distributes conditional grants to local and provincial level governments to fund schools and train teachers (MoEST, 2021). The distribution of the federal education budget is displayed below in Figure 2.5, where it is observed that half of the education budget is spent on basic education, with secondary education following at 19% of the budget.

**Figure 2. 5**

*Distribution of the 2020/21 Education Budget by Education Level*

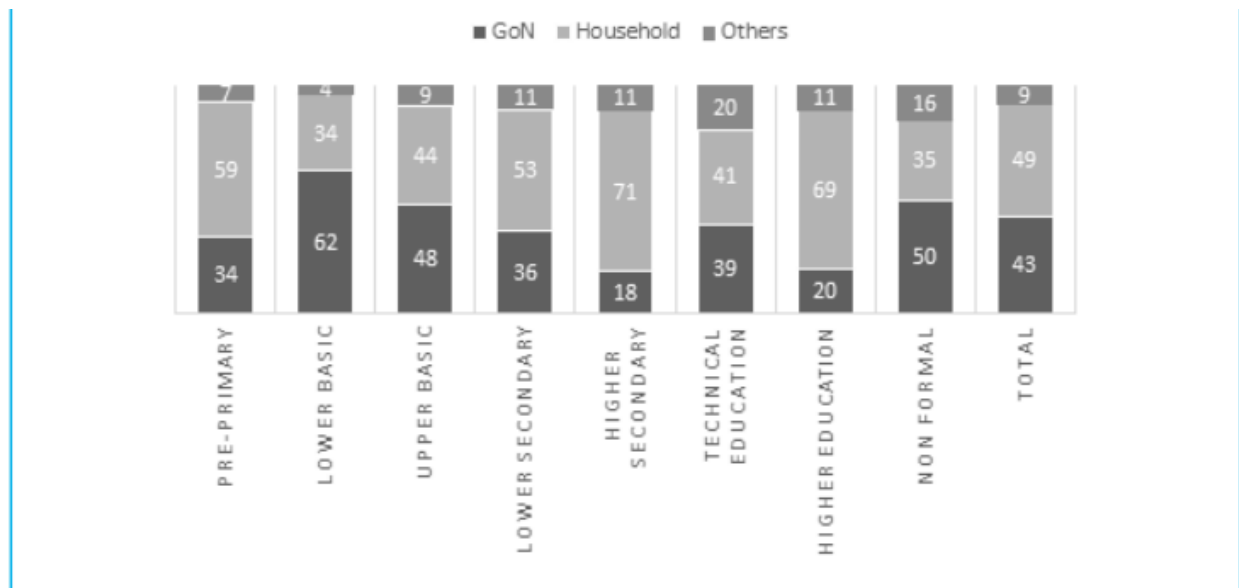


Adapted from: “Nepal: Education Sector Analysis 2021 (2078 BS),” by MoEST, 2021, *Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology*, p. 161.

Nepal’s education budget is not solely reliant upon government funding, as this accounted for only 44.5% of education funding in 2019/20. An astonishing 49% of funds came from parent contributions in this same fiscal year (MoEST, 2021). By investigating this further, household shares of total contributions to education were the highest for higher secondary schooling levels in 2014/15, as displayed in Figure 2.6. Overall education budget expenditures show that household expenditures are a major source of funding, which is significant when considering that education has been declared a basic right and is supposed to be “free” through the basic level. The exclusionary nature of education fees deepens the investments and sacrifices made to afford these educational pathways.

**Figure 2. 6**

*Household Share of Total Expenditure on Education in Nepal (2014/15)*



Adapted from: *Education Budget Brief*, (p. 21), UNICEF Nepal Country Office, 2021, UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/13271/file/Education%20-%20Budget%20Brief.pdf>

### *Costs of Schooling & Scholarship Schemes*

Given that parent contributions make up almost 50% of the total educational budget, it is imperative to assess why there is such a huge reliance on households to pay for education and how accessible financial aid is for households. Although basic and secondary schooling is considered free, there are indirect costs associated with obtaining an education that only increase with grade level (see Figure 2.7). In comparison to household expenditures at the lower basic schooling level, expenses for upper secondary schooling increase almost ten-fold. Households end up taking on expenses for both private and public schooling in the form of tuition fees, user fees, uniforms, textbooks, supplies, and transportation. In the case of private schooling, families are also responsible for the costs of tuition (MoEST, 2021).

**Figure 2. 7**

*Household expenditure (NPR) per student by type and level of education for 2019/20*

	Payments to educational institutions	Expenses outside educational institutions					Totals
		Uniforms	Textbooks & supplies	Transport	Other (snacks, etc.)	Private tuition	
<b>Public schools</b>							
ECED/PPE	513	489	451	18	496	58	2,025
Lower basic	478	698	774	14	582	172	2,719
Upper-basic	1,135	1,105	1,553	15	960	308	5,076
Lower secondary	2,749	1,363	2,882	58	2,083	1,794	10,928
Higher secondary	14,474	1,406	3,120	471	2,781	1,305	23,557
Technical colleges	20,115	1,409	3,121	466	2,785	1,301	29,197
University constituent colleges	16,903	916	5,443	2,107	3,170	1,220	29,758
University community colleges	15,310	794	4,356	2,370	1,897	1,454	26,181

Note: The conversion to USD should follow the rate of 1 USD = 119.18 NPR.<sup>6</sup>

Adapted from: “Nepal: Education Sector Analysis 2021 (2078 BS),” by MoEST, 2021, *Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology*, p. 165.

Meanwhile, scholarship distribution is at the jurisdiction of local governments and accounted for 2.8% of local government spending in 2019/20 (MoEST, 2021). Scholarship schemes have been established in Nepal since 1971, but a study based on 2010 Nepal Living Standards Survey data indicated that the average annual scholarship amount was only 755 NPR (around 10 USD<sup>7</sup>) (Datt & Uhe, 2019). In a study done on scholarship schemes and child labor in Nepal, it was argued that the amount of assistance in scholarship awards was not sufficient to

<sup>6</sup> Based on the conversion rates at the time that I conducted this research and falls under the same year that this report was published. Exchange Rates UK. (2022b, May 31). *US Dollar to Nepalese Rupee Exchange Rate History For 11 November 2021 (11/11/21)*. Exchange Rates UK. [https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-NPR-11\\_11\\_2021-exchange-rate-history.html](https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-NPR-11_11_2021-exchange-rate-history.html)

<sup>7</sup> Calculated using the conversion rate 1 USD= 73.1026 NPR based on the average rate in 2010. Exchange Rates UK. (2022a, May 31). *US Dollar to Nepalese Rupee Spot Exchange Rates for 2010*. Exchange Rates UK. <https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-NPR-spot-exchange-rates-history-2010.html>

address the direct and indirect costs for students to attend schooling (Datt & Uhe, 2019). Most scholarships remain in the form of direct monetary or material support to students or their families, but the scholarship identification and distribution system are wrought with holes in communication, low monitoring, and unclear purpose as need-based or merit (Acharya & Luitel, 2006). The Department of Education (DOE) distributes funds based on enrollment and quotas for distribution, and the district-level school management committees (SMCs) determine which schools are allotted scholarship aid. Individual selection of scholarship awards and disbursement of funds is directed by local-level SMCs (Datt & Uhe, 2019). However, it has been found that headteachers play a larger role in determining lists of prospective scholarship-receiving students. In addition, the overall scholarship system does not account for students who enroll later in the academic year or who have dropped out of school (Acharya & Luitel, 2006; Datt & Uhe, 2019). With a lack of clear scholarship criteria and monitoring mechanisms, granting scholarship awards has become an increasingly subjective process based on headteachers' and SMC members' personal preferences (Acharya & Luitel, 2006). This directly impacts students who otherwise cannot afford education, as access to scholarships are often determined by one's social connections.

Scholarships provided by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are often in the form of infrastructure projects and school feeding programs that are sent directly to schools to distribute accordingly (MoEST, 2021). Along with civil society groups, INGOs have also been instrumental in addressing child wellbeing and mental health in schools during periods of disaster and recovery in Nepal (MoEST, 2021), however, equitable scholarship selection and comprehensive support still remain in question (Acharya & Luitel, 2006). With such ambiguous

scholarship schemes for 10+2 and the climbing price of education as schooling level increases, 10+2 students face heightened challenges.

### *Upper Secondary Schooling Challenges*

Compounding the higher expenses associated with upper secondary schooling is the fact that just over 10% of total schools in the country offered higher secondary school level education in 2011 (MoEST, 2018). Attendance rates in upper secondary education in Nepal in 2019 were 47%, indicating that less than half of students of this school-going age were attending higher secondary school. In 2019, completion rates for primary education were 82%, whereas upper secondary school graduation rates trailed far behind at 27% (UNICEF, 2021). While a deeper analysis of these discrepancies is in the next section, a prominent barrier in accessing 10+2 schooling is exams at the conclusion of Class 10.

Passing the Secondary Education Exam (SEE), formerly known as the School Leaving Certificate (SLC), is required to apply to 10+2 schooling. Previously, the SLC was called the “iron gate” because the exams required intense studying and were nearly impossible to pass (Andersen, 2018). Even with the change to the SEE and its grading system in 2016, there is still debate over whether these higher pass rates reflect an effective assessment of learning in Nepal (Dixit, 2020). The SEE exams are one of many barriers facing students from continuing their schooling past the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Considering these discrepancies in upper secondary school enrollment, completion, and the already higher costs associated with higher-level schooling, it is necessary to consult how Nepali students and their families value education and reckon with the decision to continue on to 10+2 schooling, as well as how institutions and the education system contribute to such narratives.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings to the Value of Schooling & Family Values**

As the history and political economy of Nepal's education system has documented, conceptions of "modernity" and "development" have been integral components to how education is valued in Nepal. Much of this value can be traced back to modernization theory, a framework current in 1960s and 1970s global development theory and practice that dictated that all societies should proceed along a pathway of industrialization and global free-market trade so that they could modernize in the same way that Western Europe and the United States did during the Industrial Revolution. In a wider context, modernization theory is highly critiqued for positing a linear progression for "traditional" societies to "modernize" through insertion of economic capital (Raby et al., 2020). Globally, the cultural production of the "educated person" through the institution of standardized, formal mass schooling has also been scrutinized for deepening social inequalities based on class, gender, and race, and the intersectionality of these variables. Mass schooling also places value on chronological academic progression, which has especially severe repercussions for students who may not progress linearly through schooling (Valentin, 2011). In the context of Nepal, modernity and its role in education has a unique definition and place.

From the establishment of public schooling in Nepal in 1950, formal education has been associated with achieving new forms of knowledge or consciousness and breaking from the "traditional" (Valentin, 2011). The value of education as it contributes to "modernity" narratives in Nepal has been explored and critiqued by various scholars across societal contexts in Nepal. Among them, scholar Stacey Pigg (1992) has used the Nepali term *bikās* to describe the "...ideology of modernization: the representation of society through an implicit scale of social progress" (p. 499). In this case, widespread "modern" schooling in both national development planning and foreign aid discourse was viewed as an avenue for Nepalese society to "develop,"



and for families to achieve social and economic mobility (Valentin, 2011; Pigg 1992; Liechty, 2003). The current project is framed by an understanding of education as an asset that shapes conceptions of modernization in Nepal not only from the perspective of scholars and institutions, but of parents and students as well.

Since Nepal's national education system has barely crossed the seventy-year mark, there still exist gaps in parent and child education levels that contribute to the urgency in upward mobility through education (The World Bank Group, 2016). This rhetoric of education as a pathway to escape rural poverty has been spread globally and is not just unique to Nepal (Crivello, 2011). The pressures that accompany pursuing education have been observed in rural communities of Peru, where one case study found that education was viewed to improve oneself and progress in life, including benefits to one's family (Crivello, 2011). The influence of parents on students' educational pathways in higher education has also been highlighted in a recent study on education-to-work transitions for youth in Nepal. The value of education was stressed by parents who wished for better educational pathways for their children than what they had experienced (Basnet et al., 2021b). These reflect historical conceptions of being uneducated or illiterate as a source of ignorance and prohibiting progression toward "development" (Pigg, 1992). In the case of Basnet and colleagues' study (2021), parents' influences were found to both be a source of support, especially in the form of finances, but also a barrier to students' desired educational pathways. Parents' preferences could dictate students' trajectories toward perceived economically productive pathways that did not align with students' interests (Basnet et al., 2021b; Karki, 2014). There are also barriers posed by parents' lack of education, as students' academic performance is typically supported by parents' education and access to material resources at home (Pangeni, 2014).

While there may be both positive and negative influences from parents on students' educational pathways, it is also important to consider how broader communities influence Nepali students' educational experiences. Educational decisions arguably hold a special significance in societies with collectivist cultural orientations, where choices are often made for the benefit of one's wider social group, rather than for the individual (Joshi et al., 2018). There are many collectivist orientations in Nepal; however, given Nepal's vast diversity of peoples and traditions, collectivist ideals do not necessarily represent every community nor individual in the nation (Cole & Tamang, 1998). In some cases, the heightened value of education can come in conflict with obligations many students may have to their family economy. Hence, the value of education in the context of Nepal is best situated through the exploration of family structure and dynamics. While it is impossible to make sweeping generalizations about typical Nepali family structure and composition, to frame the understanding of the embeddedness of children in families I make some overarching descriptions of family systems in Nepal based on my research sample.

### *Family Structure & Dynamics*

Many Nepali students are raised in environments where they are fully integrated into their family and community life, where they have strong senses of obligation to these inner circles. Embeddedness in the family can be high because of communal living, extended networks of kinship, and expectations for children to make economic contributions to the family and community. The term *afnomanchhe*<sup>8</sup> (*āphnō mānchē*) (one's own people) in reference to one's own family has been used to describe the connections and commitments one has to their kinship in Nepal. *Afnomanchhe* in this context describes a system of obligation and reciprocity to those

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<sup>8</sup> Other meanings of *afnomanchhe* will be expanded upon in the upcoming section as well as in Chapter 7.

who are considered family no matter the circumstance (Subedi, 2014). This can contribute to the pursuit of education as a collective journey involving both a student and their family, as there are expectations to always prioritize one's "inner circle" (Sreedharan & Thorsen, 2020). Even outside of investments in education, *afnomanchhe* describes commitments made to one's own kin (Bista, 1991).

Social ideals of reciprocal intergenerational exchange are strong in Nepal, but they are by no means exclusive to Nepali societies. Anthropologists have long examined how reciprocal exchange is a fundamental aspect of social function dating back to archaic societies, where exchanging physical gifts or favors created systems of obligation with actors both within and outside of the family unit (Mauss, 1950/1990). In a study done in the United States, Asian-American parental expectations held the greatest influence over second-generation children's feelings of familial obligations (Trieu, 2016). The moral, social, and economic obligations to home communities have also been explored in the case of Indian transnational communities. Velayutham & Wise (2005) explored how a village in rural South India was sustained through moral systems of obligation and exchange of village members living abroad, indicating the integrity of trans-local codes of responsibility. With this model of reciprocal exchange in mind, higher educational attainment for children can translate into higher debts to repay to one's family in societies such as Nepal with strong undercurrents of intergenerational reciprocity (Brauner-Otto, 2009).

There are varying degrees of social and gendered norms of intergenerational support in Nepal, as there are generally higher expectations for transfers of care or monetary support from sons to parents. Joint families are often patrilocal, where sons to remain living with their parents after marriage (Brauner-Otto, 2009). For daughters, the expectation that they will eventually

move out of home and live with their in-laws after marriage diminish parents' perceptions of the benefits of investing in their education (Brunson, 2016), however, education was still valued in providing better prospects for a marriage pairing (Skinner & Holland, 1996). While there exist different gendered barriers and expectations for intergenerational care, the importance of education as an economic lever can be observed across Nepali society. These dynamics are not universal as family composition and culture vary across Nepal, however, recognizing what is considered traditional expectations of duty to the family can inform present dynamics.

Although there are now shifting social contexts to these intergenerational transfers, pursuing education can hold greater weight to include benefitting the family economically and socially, or otherwise providing upward mobility. The interplay between student, family, and upward mobility has been researched in the context of India as well, where although upward mobility may be idealized it is not restricted by individual class but rather one's family's economic, social, and cultural resources. (Dickey, 2002). It was found that individual aspirations become overshadowed by the linked endeavors one has with their family. In the context of South Asian, collectivist-oriented households, the benefits of education must factor in the sacrifices made by the larger family unit.

#### *Farming Families and Responsibilities*

These collective orientations might be particularly prevalent in subsistence-based rural villages, where interdependence is emphasized through the shared tasks of survival (Cole & Tamang, 1998). Children can form a major component of the workforce in Nepali families, as farming and household tasks can be expected at the age of five to help both the nuclear family and the wider community. Children's obligations to their families are thus heightened in families or communities that are dependent on subsistence farming for their livelihoods, or in more rural

and lower-socioeconomic households (Bista, 1991; Acharya & Luitel, 2006). A case study of a disadvantaged population of Nepali students revealed that in households where livelihoods depended on household or agricultural tasks, these students were more likely to drop out of schooling (Valentin, 2005). This was also reflected in another study in Nepal in 2012 where it was found that 22% of respondents dropped out of schooling because they were needed at home (MoEST, 2021). While this could indicate that family obligations disadvantage students, it could also be interpreted as formal schooling being highly selective in disadvantaging certain students from succeeding in the system.

The opportunity costs associated with schooling in Nepal are found to be quite high, especially when the value of household chores is monetized for comparison. Students in primary school who performed housework did chores worth 4607 NPR annually (around 63 USD).<sup>9</sup> This amount was predicted to increase to 8792 NPR (around 120 USD) for a student pursuing secondary schooling (Acharya & Luitel, 2006). While these calculations were from a small-scale research project done in 2004, household expenditures for upper basic schooling amount to around 23,557 NPR (around 198 USD)<sup>10</sup> in Nepal today (MoEST, 2021). This illustrates that there are opportunity costs to weigh against education opportunities, and that they are projected to increase with age and grade level. To further complicate these matters, many students are also forced to factor rural to urban migration into their decisions due to the lack of 10+2 level schools across Nepal.

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<sup>9</sup> Based on the conversion rate 1 USD= 72.78 NPR from the average rate in 2004. Exchange Rates. (n.d.). *NPR to USD Historical Chart 2004*. ExchangeRates.Org. <https://exchangerates.org/npr/usd/in-2004>

<sup>10</sup> Based on the conversion rate 1 USD= 119.18 NPR from the average rate in 2021. Exchange Rates UK. (2022b, May 31). *US Dollar to Nepalese Rupee Exchange Rate History For 11 November 2021 (11/11/21)*. Exchange Rates UK. [https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-NPR-11\\_11\\_2021-exchange-rate-history.html](https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-NPR-11_11_2021-exchange-rate-history.html)

### *Rural to Urban Migration for Upward Mobility*

Social and economic mobility through education is largely realized through rural-urban migration to Kathmandu for schooling, a trend that became even more prevalent in Nepal after the Maoist conflict destroyed many educational resources in rural areas (Basnet et al., 2021a). Migration for studying accounted for 7.8% of internal migrants' movements in Nepal in a 2017-2018 Nepal Labour Force Survey (IOM, 2020). A large proportion of Nepal's population are youth (between the ages of 16-40 years old), and in 2011 52.9% of youth were living in the urban capital of Kathmandu (Ministry of Youth & Sports, 2014). Outside of the monetary costs of migrating to urban areas, there are social costs when students uproot from their communities. While this phenomenon has been explored in the realm of international migration out of Nepal, there is less literature on internal rural-to-urban migration. Early studies have underscored rural migrants' lack of social connections that make the transition to urban spaces challenging and have highlighted the importance of migrants to find similar pockets of community when they move, or "make a home away from home" (Basnet et al., 2021b; Brøgger, 2019). Even with the presence of community in new places, it can be difficult to offset the costs of migrating to the city, so many students may have to juggle a job and schooling simultaneously. Since many students feel culturally and socially indebted to their parents, these costly pathways would presumably present a collective conflict for students who might otherwise be contributing to their household economy through work (Basnet et al., 2021a).

Moreover, literature from the United States has shown that students on upwardly mobile pathways in higher education (oftentimes first-generation, low-income students) encounter moral dilemmas due to the ethical costs of migrating for school (Morton, 2019). Students must make tradeoffs of certain "ethical goods," such as relationships with family and friends, while in

pursuit of their education. These ethical goods and tradeoffs are unique because relationships, people, and communities are particular and cannot be easily replaced (Morton, 2019). These compromises can have adverse effects on both the students and families or greater communities in which students are deeply embedded, or when there are higher opportunity costs. While the context of schooling in Nepal differs from that of the United States, students pursuing a 10+2 education may have to make similar sacrifices in moving away from their home communities. As students' obligations and environments change in these spaces, it remains important and unexplored how their connections to their home communities are affected by the transition. Coupled with the monetary, opportunity, and ethical costs associated with upper secondary schooling are the unrealistic prospects facing students upon graduating with a 10+2 degree, and the exclusionary nature of needing social connections.

#### *'Afnomanchhe' and Social Capital*

While *afnomanchhe* refers to the obligations and commitments one has to their networks of kinship, it holds other meanings in other contexts that indicate how upward mobility is restricted through social capital in Nepal. Dor Bahadur Bista, a well-known Nepali anthropologist, has highlighted the roots of *afnomanchhe* in Nepali culture as limiting pathways of upward mobility through education. Bista (1991) defines *afnomanchhe* as a term used to “designate one's inner circle of associates to those who can be approached whenever the need arises. The strength or weakness of anyone is measured in terms of the quality and quantity of the circles of *afnomanchhe* he is a part of” (p. 98). He has argued that power and social connections are deemed necessary to achieve prestige and upward mobility, thus limiting the extent that higher education can benefit students (Bista, 1991; Acharya & Luitel, 2006).

*Afnomanchhe* has existed in Nepali society for centuries, from the existence of favoritism

and nepotism during the Rana rule to the present-day corruption in Nepal's government (Subedi, 2014) where allocation of education scholarships or jobs depend on having a proper social network. While one could say this may discount the value of a 10+2 education, this stands in contradiction to how UNICEF has declared formal and nonformal secondary schooling as a necessary addition to primary schooling, as the skills students acquire and refine in secondary schooling are thought to correlate with increases in GDP and higher earnings, leading to overall economic, political, and social growth in nations (UNICEF, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Instead, it should be observed that if students wish to pursue and reap the benefits of higher levels of education, they should not be restricted by their social capital. Unfortunately, this is a reality many students face in lacking employment opportunities once they finish 10+2 schooling. Such structural limitations are not only found in Nepal, as in the United States it was found that students' economic backgrounds determined their level of intergenerational mobility through education (Isaacs et al., 2008). A UNICEF study also found that educational inequality was prevalent in "high income" countries and was related to parents' occupations, gender, migration background, and differences amongst schools. This indicates that family background is a large determinant of educational inequality across the Global North and South (Chzhen et al., 2018). The restrictions posed by one's economic background and access to social capital undermine the notion that upward mobility is equally achievable for everyone through education.

The conflicting narrative of the important yet fleeting value of education forces Nepali students and families to make difficult decisions about the value of education, family, and economic opportunity in the future. Unfortunately, on top of the pressures that students may face to economize their education immediately, there are even more factors contributing to difficult transitions from school to work after 10+2 schooling.



### *Unaligned Employment & Outmigration*

Nepal has the highest average youth unemployment rate in the Asia-Pacific region at 28.9% (MoEST, 2021). The unemployment rate in Nepal was 11.4% in 2018, and although youth made up 48% of the working population that year, they accounted for 69% of those unemployed (MoEST, 2021). Although labor force participation generally increases with education level, in Nepal it is very difficult for students with secondary education to gain employment. Students with a secondary or post-secondary vocational training degree experience the lowest rates of transfer into stable employment, standing at 47% (MoEST, 2021). There is a low absorptive capacity for work outside of the informal or agricultural sector, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on both foreign and domestic employment do not provide a promising outlook for recent graduates of upper schooling to obtain employment (MoEST, 2021). While these issues are multi-faceted and deserve further elaboration, the larger challenge emerging from these figures is that students' education attainment does not directly align with easy access to employment. As a result of a mismatch in employment opportunities upon graduating, many youths in Nepal migrate abroad to find work or further education abroad. The already insufficient labor market for youth in Nepal was exacerbated under the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as remittances slowed and the possibility to seek employment abroad dwindled (MoEST, 2021), although the pressure to migrate arguably heightened.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic in Nepal**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to one of the most severe disruptions to education in global history. School closures resulted in 1.6 billion children out of school worldwide in the first year of the pandemic, with an estimated 1.3 billion students without any access to remote learning (The Alliance, 2022). Data collected on students' access to schooling has reflected

deeper inequalities for students based on gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location; especially as remote schooling remained largely inaccessible for poor, rural dwelling students (UNICEF, UNESCO, and The World Bank, 2022; United Nations, 2022a). Since longer periods of time spent out of school correlate to higher rates of school attrition, the long-term impacts of pandemic school closures will most likely be especially severe for marginalized students who are already limited in school participation by socioeconomic factors, such as the need to generate household income or home responsibilities (United Nations, 2022a). In addition to the loss of education, the subsequent impacts on the mental and physical health of students worldwide are predicted to be “insurmountable,” particularly for those in low-to-middle income countries (UNICEF, 2022).

Early in the pandemic, more than 8.5 million learners were affected by school closures in Nepal (Dawadi et al., 2020). A national lockdown was enacted from March to July 2020, with subsequent local lockdowns lasting until August 2020. By mid-March 2021, lockdown measures and the rollout of the vaccine campaign saw daily case numbers reach less than 100 nationwide. However, due to the rise of the Delta variant Nepal weathered another wave of the pandemic that led to government lockdowns and eventually less restrictive measures from April until October 2021. Then again in January 2022 mobility restrictions were put in place to mitigate the spread of the Omicron variant, lasting until March 2022 (The World Bank Group, 2022). Trends in caseloads of COVID-19 can be seen in [Figure 2.1](#), shared earlier in this chapter. By the end of March 2022, close to three-quarters of the population of Nepal had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and 64% of the population received a full dose. (The World Bank Group, 2022).

Learning in the context of COVID-19 has looked different for students across Nepal, as remote learning options have depended on the capacity of the school and home resources to offer and connect to electronic resources (Dawadi et al., 2020). In total, school closures in Nepal amounted to over 18 months (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022), yet under half of students of school-going age had internet connectivity at home in 2019. Although a higher percentage of upper secondary school students had access to internet at home, there are still deep disparities in access to the internet across rural and urban groups and socioeconomic quintiles in Nepal (see Table 2.3). Moreover, while older students may have greater competency with technology and online learning, the opportunity costs and pressures placed on higher educational pathways are arguably heightened for 10+2 students.

**Table 2.3**

*School Age Digital Connectivity in Nepal*

	Nepal	Rural	Urban	Poorest Quintile	Richest Quintile
All Education Levels	47%	32%	55%	16%	88%
Higher Secondary Level	49%	34%	57%	18%	90%

Adapted from: *Remote Learning and Digital Connectivity* (2021, May) UNICEF, UNICEF Data. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/remote-learning-and-digital-connectivity/>

As part of their COVID-19 response, the Nepali government promoted a learning continuity campaign using the mediums of television, radio, and other platforms, yet only around half of rural community households in Nepal had access to these forms of media (Radhakrishnan et al., 2021). Realistically a comprehensive virtual learning campaign was predicted to take at least three to four years to implement in Nepal (Ghimire, 2020). As the effects of the pandemic are still ongoing, the digital divide in Nepal is forecasted to only continue to deepen inequalities faced by disadvantaged student populations (Dawadi et al., 2020). These disparities in resources

and access to remote learning options in Nepal have indicated a need to rely on community-based schooling options (Dawadi et al., 2020).

The pandemic presents many misfortunes to students and their families, but it might also produce some benefits by allowing 10+2 students to learn while staying embedded in their communities--a possibility that did not exist for many before the pandemic. Studies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal have highlighted how longer periods at home have allowed for greater contextual learning beyond the formal institutions of rote memorization by focusing on building autonomous, child-centered learning and greater engagement in applying studies to their home environment (Chapagain & Neupane, 2020). It has also been found that Nepali students' social support from their friends, relatives, parents, and teachers correlates with lower levels of anxiety in school (Singh et al., 2020), which suggests that the unfortunate circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic could be mitigated through the support of social relationships.

### **Purpose of Study**

Against the backdrop of the logistical, financial, and ideological challenges associated with upper secondary education for Nepali students, the COVID-19 pandemic has likely intensified the difficulties that students face. It is essential to assess how older students were affected by situations of returning to their communities to study and how they grappled with potentially competing responsibilities during the pandemic. Little work to date has addressed how educational-related ethical dilemmas may uniquely present themselves in a South Asian, LMIC in a collectivist-oriented context. This research contributes to the literature on the impacts of COVID-19 on upper secondary educational experiences in Nepal, but also reflects on what

students idealize in their education to inform how their pathways to upward mobility can be more holistically supported.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

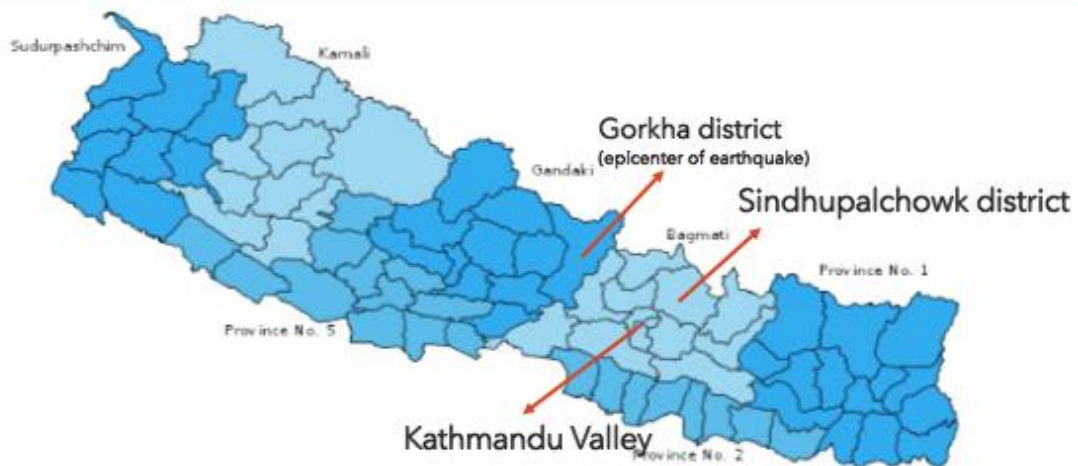
### Description of Research Site

#### *Kathmandu & Sindhupalchowk Districts*

For this remote, qualitative research I worked with individuals living in two districts in Bagmati (*Bāgamatī*) province in Nepal. Bagmati province is home to Kathmandu district, where the capital of Nepal is located. Kathmandu as a district has a growing population of 2,017,532 people (CBS, 2022b), however, the Kathmandu Valley also includes the neighboring Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts. In combination with the populations of these districts, the Kathmandu Valley has a population of closer to three million people (CBS, 2022b). Sindhupalchowk (*Sindhupālcōka*) district is just north of the Kathmandu Valley and extends up to the mountainous border of Tibet.

#### **Figure 3. 1**

#### *The Two Districts in Bagmati Province Used for Research Sampling*



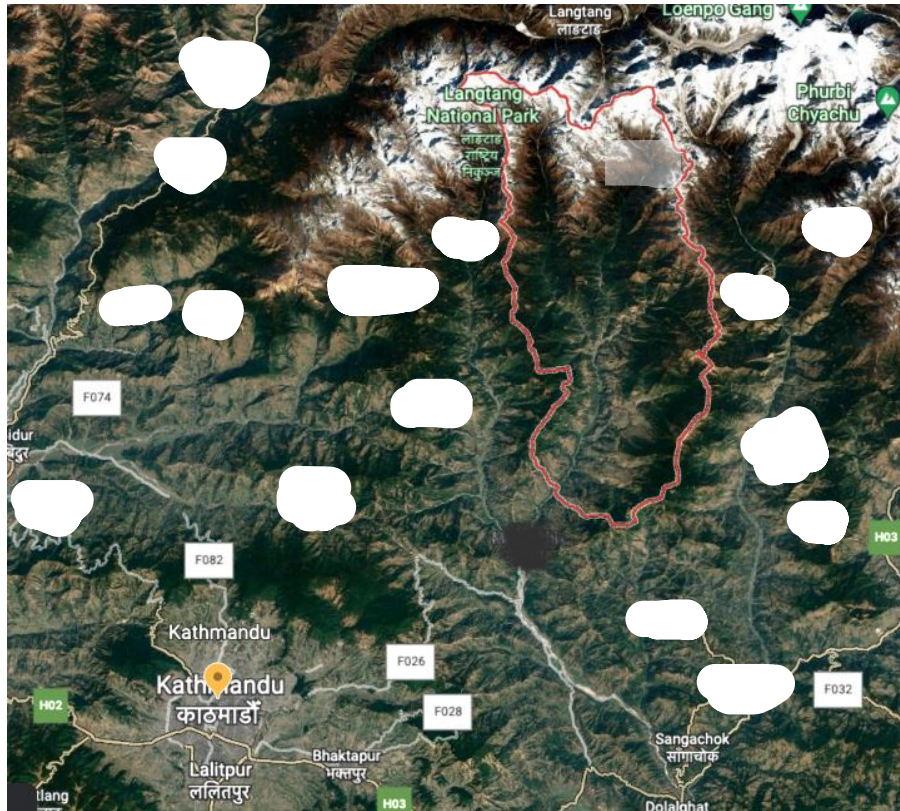
Adapted from: “Nepal: Education Sector Analysis 2021 (2078 BS),” by MoEST, 2021, *Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology*, p. 29.

Sindhupalchowk is estimated to have a population of 262,852 people and 69,751 households (CBS, 2022b), which shows a reduction in total population from 2011 census data (CBS, 2012). This could indicate the higher rates of people leaving the country to seek work or schooling abroad, as the absentee population in Sindhupalchowk is 17,741 (CBS, 2022b).

About 29% of land in Sindhupalchowk is dedicated to agriculture, so it is no surprise that over three-quarters of the population depends on subsistence farming to survive (RAP, 2019). With the terrain spanning mid to high hills and mountainous land, agricultural production is subject to low crop yields (DCCO, 2022; RAP, 2019). The massive earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015 was especially devastating to Sindhupalchowk due to its proximity to the epicenter in Gorkha district (see Figure 3.1) and the large-scale aftershocks that followed. According to reports in May 2015, 63,885 homes in Sindhupalchowk were severely damaged in the wake of the disaster. Of the 567 schools in Sindhupalchowk, 382 were destroyed in the earthquake, with close to 150 more moderately damaged (OSOCC Assessment Cell, 2015). Temporary Learning Centers (TLCs) were constructed to temporarily house students and continue school, but for many, schooling was completely halted for a month or longer (UNICEF 2015; CMI Nepal, 2016). Even though three years had passed since the earthquake when I was living in Sindhupalchowk, I observed classes running out of TLCs in other villages where schools were still being rebuilt. The impacts of the earthquake on education and life in Sindhupalchowk were long-lasting.

**Figure 3. 2**

*Taji Rural Municipality Outlined in Red*



Note: Adapted from Google Earth.

### *Taji Rural Municipality*

To preserve confidentiality, all administrative locations below the provincial and district level are referred to with a pseudonym. This encompasses all school names as well. My time spent teaching in Nepal was in a village that was part of Taji rural municipality in the northern part of Sindhupalchowk district (see Figure 3.2), and this served as the location where most of my research participants were from. The total population of Taji rural municipality was anticipated to be around 20,860 people in 2011 (CBS, 2012). Now, it has been split into eight different village wards that have populations ranging from around 1,800 to 3,500 people (Karki, 2019). However, multiple villages may fall under an administrative ward, and each village varies



in size. The image in Figure 3.3 shows three clusters of these villages from afar for perspective. Unfortunately, with the lack of data released from the 2021 preliminary census, I will mainly be reporting data from the municipality level as village-level data is not available.

**Figure 3. 3**

*Several Village Clusters in Taji Rural Municipality*



Source: Wright, 2019.

Ethnically, the majority of the population in Taji is Tamang. In 2011, 12,391 individuals in this rural municipality reported Tamang as their primary language, as opposed to 5,978 individuals who primarily spoke Nepali. Other major ethnic groups and castes include Chhetri (2,728), Hyolmo (1,140), Newar (953), and Kami (747), which in combination with the Tamang make up over 85% of the rural municipality population (Karki, 2019). Many students entering Nepali-medium schooling in this area do not speak Nepali as their first language. In 2011, there

were 34 total Grade 1-12 schools reported in Taji rural municipality, with an average of 157 students per school.

### *Namrata Village*

Namrata (*Namratā*) Secondary School was the school where I taught from 2018 to 2019. The school was in Namrata village, which belonged to the larger Namrata village ward that included several clusters of villages (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4). As seen in the photos displayed, Namrata village was in a hilly region estimated to be at about 1700 meters.

**Figure 3. 4**

### *Namrata Secondary School*



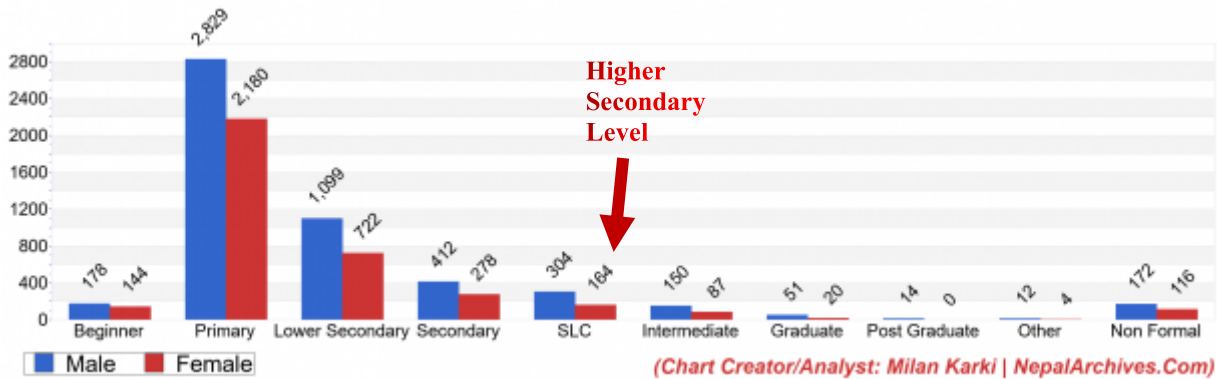
Note: Adapted from Google Earth.

Namrata Secondary School was open to students from several of the village wards and had a population of around 300 student attendees. At the time I was living in this village, student households relied mainly on rice, millet, wheat, maize, and small livestock for subsistence farming. Most of the homes and buildings in the area were originally built from stone or mud and

many were destroyed in the earthquake (CMI Nepal, 2016). Numerous people were still rebuilding their homes and had been residing in makeshift, temporary shelters for more than three years. The secondary school where I taught was nearly completely destroyed in the earthquake but was newly rebuilt with the help of NGOs (CMI Nepal, 2016). Farming and rebuilding homes consumed the day-to-day lives of many villagers, which I observed by staying with a homestay family and engaging in daily life activities in the village.

**Figure 3. 5**

*Number of Students by Gender in Each Education Level in Taji Rural Municipality*



Adapted from: *Name of Website Withheld* by M. Karki, 09 December 2019, Nepal Archives. Site of webpage withheld for confidentiality.

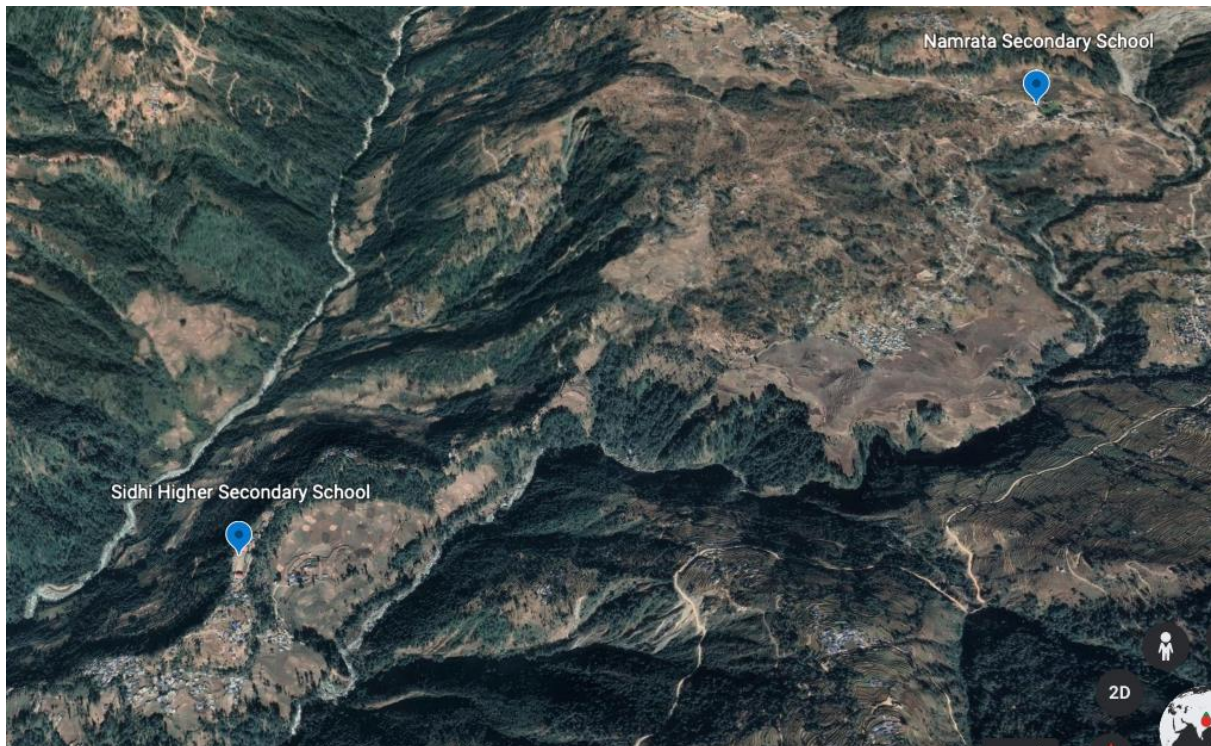
### *10+2 Schooling Options*

There is a steep decline in student enrollment from primary to higher grade levels in Taji rural municipality, as displayed in Figure 3.5. Out of the 5,461 total students in this cluster of eight wards between the ages of 5 to 25 years old, the number of students enrolled at the SLC level, synonymous with higher secondary level, is very low at 668 total students. The number of students enrolled steeply drops off as the level of education rises. During my time teaching at Namrata, I observed that while there were several primary schools offering education from Early Child Development (ECD) to Class 5 and secondary schools (ECD to Class 10) in the village

wards, there were not many nearby opportunities for 10+2 schooling. Since Namrata was a secondary school and only offered classes up until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, students had to seek options elsewhere to pursue higher secondary education.

**Figure 3. 6**

*The Route from Namrata Secondary School (~1700m) to Sidhi Higher Secondary School (~1200m)*



Note: Adapted from Google Earth.

The closest 10+2 school was located about six kilometers (around 3.7 miles) away from Namrata Secondary School in Sidhi (*Sidhī*) ward. Sidhi Higher Secondary School offered classes from ECD to Class 12 and had about 600-700 total students in the school. In 2022, an estimated 40 students were studying in Sidhi School's Class 12. Since students lived in various villages, the exact distance they commuted differed. However, the general route between the two village area schools, which were both located in Taji rural municipality, can be seen in Figure 3.6.

Depending on where students resided, they would have to walk well over one hour each way to Sidhi Higher Secondary School, which was located at around 1,200m of elevation. This meant a long uphill walk back home at the end of the school day for many students in the Namrata village area, as there were no school buses. Students would sometimes be able to take the public bus that would transport villagers down to the distant town bazaar, however, this was not always a reliable option because the bus stopped operating during monsoon season.

The only other alternative students had to pursue 10+2 schooling was to migrate to Kathmandu or another urban area for upper secondary schooling. Even though the distance from Namrata to Kathmandu was only about 65 kilometers, it was a full day's commute to reach the city. Depending on the season and condition of the road, one would have to walk or bus down the windy road, about 22 kilometers, to the nearest bazaar. Then, you would need to catch another bus to Kathmandu, a ride that took anywhere from three to six hours depending on weather, road conditions, and traffic. Bearing in mind the composition of these students' schooling options and living situations, I move on to describe how I conducted this qualitative research.

### **Data Collection**

All study procedures were pre-approved by the Internal Review Board of the University of Oregon (STUDY00000264), and everyone who participated in the study gave oral informed consent. The consent process emphasized that their participation was entirely voluntary throughout the interview process, and I staged check-ins during the interviews to gauge participants' comfortability in continuing and allow them the opportunity to exit if so desired. Five participants declined to be involved, and I did not have any participants choose to end the interview early.

### *Recruitment and Sampling*

I recruited a purposive convenience sample of 22 individuals and conducted a total number of 27 interviews. Of the fourteen students I interviewed from the Namrata village area, I held nineteen total interviews with students by conducting several rounds of interviews with four different students. I also spoke with students' family members, their secondary school teachers, and 10+2 schoolteachers, as outlined in Table 3.1.

**Table 3. 1**

### *Interview Data*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>
10+2 Students	14	19
10+2 Teachers	2	2
Secondary School Teachers	3	3
10+2 Student's Family Members	3	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>27</b>

I relied upon my previous connections with students and village community members to arrange initial interviews, then requested that participants connect me to other interested individuals who were over the age of 18 years old. To participate in the study, students had to be at least 18 years old and be attending or have attended 10+2 schooling at Sidhi Higher Secondary School or in Kathmandu. Students were either (a) enrolled in Class 12 at the time of interviews or (b) had just graduated from Class 12 and 10+2 schooling. Students whom I had previously taught were not eligible to participate in the study to minimize conflicts of interest around my previous community role as a Fulbright teacher. Since the original aim of my research was to better understand students' social relationships and ties to home while pursuing 10+2 schooling,

it was pertinent for me to speak with students' families. I asked students if they were comfortable with me speaking with their parents and got in touch with family members through these students to confirm their interest in being interviewed. To better understand 10+2 students' experiences through this level of schooling, I also sought to interview higher secondary school teachers from the village school or in Kathmandu. I engaged with research participants over Facebook Messenger or the international calling application, Boss Revolution.

### *Conducting Remote, Semi-Structured Interviews*

Over the course of five months between September 2021 and January 2022, I conducted remote, semi-structured interviews in Nepali language with the research participants. I conducted one interview entirely in English per request with a 10+2 schoolteacher and students would sometimes speak in a mix of broken English and Nepali. I did not use a Nepali translator during interviews because I did not want to compromise the comfortability of the participants. My interview questions focused mainly on what 10+2 schooling was like, how they had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and what they would change about their experiences. Some research participants requested to see the interview guide beforehand, which I complied with and factored into my analysis of their responses.

While I had hoped that most interviews could be held using video, weak network connections supported only audio for most interviews. In the beginning, I conducted two shorter 30-minute interviews with participants to account for participant fatigue and other time commitments (Hensen et al., 2021). I conducted multiple interviews with four different students, where one student gave three interviews. However, logistically it was difficult to arrange multiple interview times with students' and community members' busy schedules and unreliable

network connections. For the remaining research participants, I held single interviews that lasted anywhere from forty minutes to over an hour and a half in duration.

During the informed consent process, I encouraged participants to find a private place for conducting the interview, but oftentimes these spaces included friends, family, or public activity in the background. In certain circumstances, the flurry of public activity in the background proved to be distracting or disruptive to the participant's ability to hear questions. However, it was also necessary to preserve privacy. One student had to walk to a nearby forest where there were many noisy picnickers in the background. However, this was the only space where he would not be within earshot of family members he lived with in Kathmandu. For other interviews where video was supported, I observed family members popping into the scene behind participants. To an extent, this allowed for a greater level of familiarity and comfortability with participants, as they would sometimes pause and introduce me to their family members. On the other hand, it may have compromised how much participants were able to share in the presence of others. To account for these privacy challenges, I asked participants to describe their surroundings at the beginning of each interview if I did not have the visual aid of video. However, it also became difficult to realize when students' environments changed. For example, one student began our interview alone in her rented room with the whistling of a pressure cooker in the background. At one point, she noticeably became less talkative and open in her responses regarding her family relationships. She turned on her video at the end of our interview to reveal her friends had returned to the room and were sitting behind her on their phones. To account for these limitations, I shared an online Google form with participants to that allowed them the opportunity to share additional information in writing after the interview. Despite having difficulty interpreting typed shorthand Nepali, it was a good source for the two



students who submitted responses after interviews that highlighted difficulties they had not felt comfortable articulating during the interviews themselves.

While my Nepali language skills were far from perfect, I believe that conducting interviews by myself helped maintain comfortability for participants. Even though it had been almost three years since I had last spoken with some of the participants, I was not a stranger to the research participants (besides the two 10+2 teachers). Especially for student interviews, I believe having familiarity helped create a more amenable and encouraging space for virtual interviews.

I took brief notes during interviews describing any audio (or visual, when video was supported) indicators in participant responses. I also recorded each interview on two separate, private recording devices after receiving permission from the participants. Some respondents requested to have copies of the recordings, which I distributed to them accordingly. If students mentioned moments of suffering or great difficulty during interviews, I tried my best to offer them solace and did not press them on sensitive subjects. All research participants were offered mental health help phone numbers after interviews, as well as compensation for the “minutes” or data used on their mobile device and their time dedicated to the research project. I deemed it most appropriate to send a mobile “top-up” directly to their device, as this transaction did not require a transfer between bank accounts or otherwise incentivize participation.

### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed interviews verbatim into Romanized Nepali before translating scripts into English. I used the help of two Nepali translators when necessary. One individual was a formal language instructor from Cornell University who had already been involved in my Nepali language learning as a tutor for around nine months previously. My other translator was a Nepali

colleague from the University of Oregon who was very familiar with the process of qualitative research. These translators helped me interpret sayings, colloquialisms, or English words that I misinterpreted as Nepali. Interpreting the multiple layers of meaning behind words was advantageous to cross-reference with my Nepali language teachers. I include Nepali transcriptions along with English translation in some quotes in my results chapters because there was either no clear English translation or the Nepali phrase was an in-vivo code.

My data analysis procedure followed a modified grounded theory approach, as my research was exploratory. After completing each written interview transcription, I wrote informal memos on my initial thoughts and interpretations of emerging or common themes. I then uploaded transcripts to the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose and analyzed data using an open coding procedure to identify large, overarching themes, followed by the second phase of coding for sub-themes. This inductive analysis was based on my loosely identified themes in writing memos but also included emerging themes and in-vivo codes (Nepali sayings or phrases that were repeated throughout the interviews). This approach helped minimize the influence of implicit bias and subjectivity in analysis by allowing themes to emerge from the data instead of imposing only my own preconceived themes on the data (Blair, 2015). After these two rounds of thorough transcript review, I had generated 19 parent codes and 32 child codes addressing themes related to students' stages of schooling, experiences with COVID, and family orientation. See Table 3.2, below, for the codebook developed in this analysis.

**Table 3. 2***Codebook Outlining 19 Parent Codes and 32 Child Codes*

Number	Parent Code	Child Code	Description
1	Access		Physical accessibility to Plus 2 (for Sidhi School or Kathmandu students as well)
2	Admission		Process of applying to Plus 2, how students heard about their school, admission fees, and also what this process looks like post Plus 2 (looking at Bachelor's options)
		Liked the School	
		Money	
		No Help	
		Post Plus 2	
		Previous Connections	
		New Village School	
3	Aspirations		Student aims or goals in life, mainly after Plus 2
4	<i>Bides Kaam</i>		Employment abroad
5	Economic Problems		Any time finances, fees, or economic difficulties are mentioned.
		Farming	
6	Effects of COVID		Reflections on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
		Access	
		Changes to Content	
		Changes to Living	
		Changes to Modality	
		<i>Khop Laagyo</i>	COVID-19 vaccine

**Table 3.3***Codebook Outlining 19 Parent Codes and 32 Child Codes*

Number	Parent Code	Child Code	Description
7	Effects of Flooding		Reflections on the effects of the Prashasta flooding, which happened in mid-June 2021.
8	Extracurriculars		Mention of extracurriculars or clubs in school (not just Plus 2).
9	Fam Communication		Communication frequency and modality with family during Plus 2 or beyond.
10	Fam Obligation Dynamics		Family obligations, expectations, responsibilities, and values. Sometimes implied, from all perspectives (student, family, community members, teachers).
		Family Dreams/Suffering	
		<i>Jimmewari/Ghar ko Kaam</i> (In-Vivo)	
		Judgment of others	
		Mature	
		Money	
		<i>Raamro Sanga PaDha</i> (In-Vivo)	
		Values Family	
		Wants Family to be Happy	
		Work/Career	
11	Fam Pride		Feelings of family being proud or happy for their students studying.
		Student Feelings of Pride	
12	Feels Support		Feelings of support or feelings of non-support from family, friends, school, or other. Could be monetary support, emotional support, or support of studies.

**Table 3. 4***Codebook Outlining 19 Parent Codes and 32 Child Codes*

<b>Number</b>	<b>Parent Code</b>	<b>Child Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
13	Hypothetical		
14	Lacking in Time		Referring to time not being enough, lacking in time, or wishing they had more time to do school, work, etc. Also included reflections of having enough time in comparison.
15	Scholarship		Scholarship or other forms of monetary support coming from the school, government, or outside organizations. Also includes lack of scholarship as well.
16	Specific Family Relationships		
17	New Village School		Anything related to the new school in the village, which now has Plus 2 offerings.
18	Transition		Transition to Plus 2 Schooling
		Drop Out	
		English Medium	
		Friendships (Old & New)	
		Homesick	
		Isolated	
		Working	
19	Value of Education		Could be implied, reflections of what benefits or aspirations are for education system or education experience.
		Discipline	
		Facilities	
		Practical	
		Variety in Subjects	

## **Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

There are limitations to this study considering I had to conduct it remotely over a short time span and across more than 12 time zones. The remote nature of interviews along with the circumstances of a global pandemic dictated who I was able to reach in purposive sampling. Hence, this research focused on a small sample of participants mainly from one rural municipality of Nepal, which should be considered before extrapolating to the wider Nepali student population. I also did not track differences based on ethnic group, caste, or gender, nor did I gather socioeconomic information on students and their families. This was a conscious choice with the understanding that there would be resulting limitations. For the purpose of this research project within its time constraints I chose to remain aware of the nuances of student background peripherally rather than placing them at the forefront of my analysis.

My status as a known entity conferred benefits that other researchers might not have been able to access, such as the ability to conduct remote interviews. My familiarity with the language, culture, and general dynamics in the village developed trust and comfortability with participants. I believe this also helped me remain sensitive of participants' comfortability as we discussed more personal topics, such as their social relationships and their inner critiques. However, my shifted role to researcher could have been confusing for participants and a cause for uncertainty and obligation to participate. To maintain our friendship or social connection teachers could have felt pressure to participate, and the same could be said for students, although I did not teach any of the students who participated in this study. Hence, many of the ethical considerations in my research are shaped by my positionality as a researcher and how I was perceived by members of this community.

Since I am not fluent in Nepali language, there were limitations to my ability to fully converse with participants to the extent that they may have been able to with a native Nepali speaker. My very basic proficiency in Tamang language could have deterred participation from family members in particular. However, I took Nepali language courses to refresh my language skills in the months leading up to this research to prepare for interviews and engage with this subject material. Additionally, my attempts to speak in participants' mother tongue could have allowed for more openness with participants even if my language skills were not fluent.

My identity as a native English language speaker with assumed international connections to higher education could have influenced participants' decisions to participate. The foreigner element of my identity also could have changed the nature and flow of interviews, or willingness of participant participation. Especially for parents and family members, participants could have been uncomfortable discussing their children's schooling with me in such a formal setting of an interview. As highlighted in Chapter 1, my positionality as a previous teacher also carried an unearned level of respect from participants that could have influenced their decision to participate. Nevertheless, I tried my best to address these elements of my identity by explaining the intent of my research was to understand participants' experiences and opinions.

I recognize that my subjective and emotional investment in this research site may have allowed for more familiarity and honesty with participants, but also made it more difficult for my analysis to be entirely impartial. Due to my closeness with my host sister and her own journey through 10+2 schooling, I understand that I may have been inclined to ask participants more specific follow-up questions based on assumptions from her experience. I am aware of the risks and benefits posed by my known outsider identity, and recognition of these ethical dilemmas have been factored into the analysis of participants' accounts.

## CHAPTER 4: GETTING TO KNOW NAMRATA STUDENTS

Right now, there is no one in my family making money so with our financial situation, my family says you should study, there is nothing bigger than your study now, at this time if you do not study then there will be no jobs available. It is very difficult for people who do not study, very difficult for uneducated people, and no matter how many joys and sorrows (*duhkha- sukha*) we have, you should go to college, you will have support from home so you can study well and achieve your own aims. This is what they have said.

- Gayatri (19 years old, female) explaining what her parents thought about her starting 10+2 schooling in Kathmandu

In this chapter, I describe key characteristics of my research participants and initial findings on their family composition, family economy, and values. These descriptions will provide context for the dynamics of family obligations and the value placed on education, which are the topics of later chapters. As reflected in Gayatri's thoughts above, the decision to pursue 10+2 schooling may be both an individual and collective one with the perception that education has long-term benefits for career options, and with parents' desire to offer their children more choices than they themselves had.

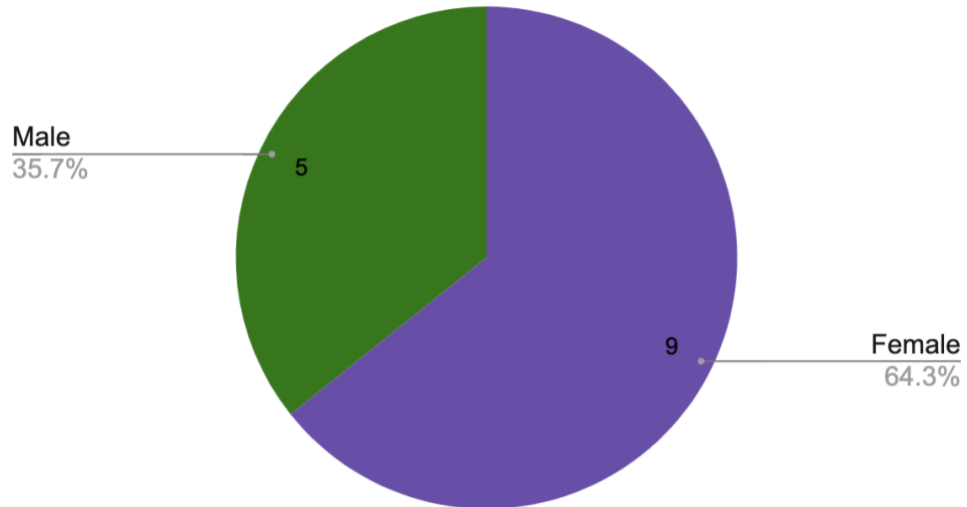
### **Description of Data**

As noted in Chapter 3, I interviewed 14 students, three sets of parents or other family members, two 10+2 teachers, and three secondary school teachers. Students ranged in age from 18-20 years old, and the average age was 18.9 years old. I interviewed more female students than male students (see Figure 4.1), which was perhaps a result of my more immediate connections with female students through my host sister, Kriti.



**Figure 4. 1**

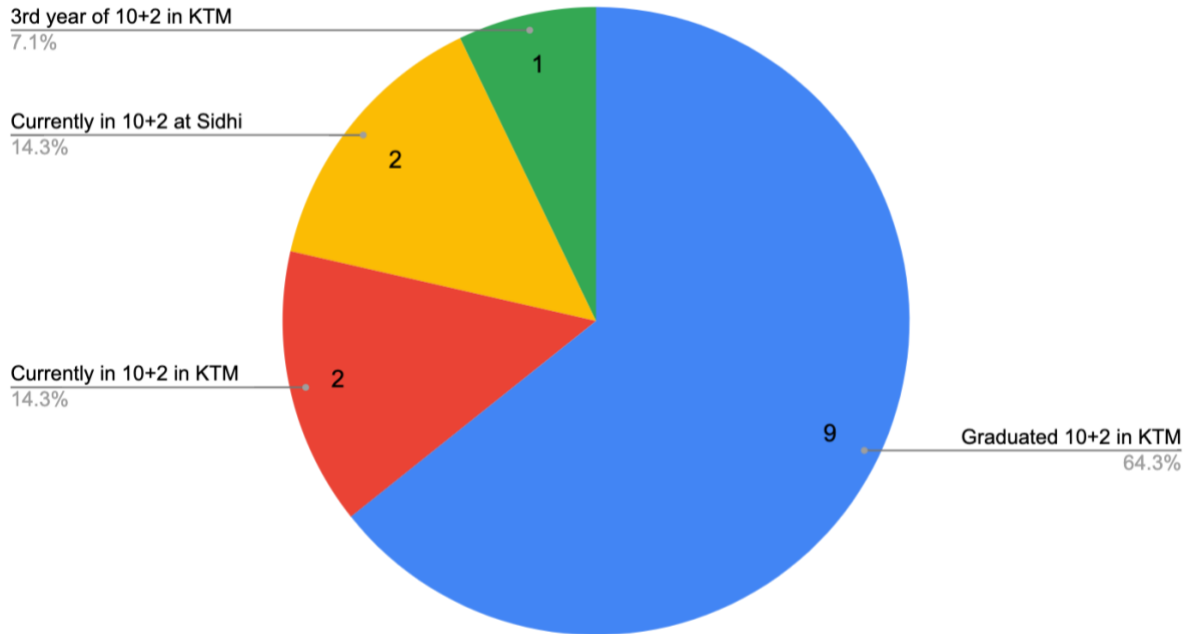
*Students Interviewed by Gender*



Another factor of these closer connections through my host sister was that I had easier access to students who had just finished 10+2 schooling in Kathmandu in comparison to other student categories. However, I was still able to speak with two students currently studying at Sidhi, as shown in Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4. 2**

*Student Interviews by Stage of Schooling*



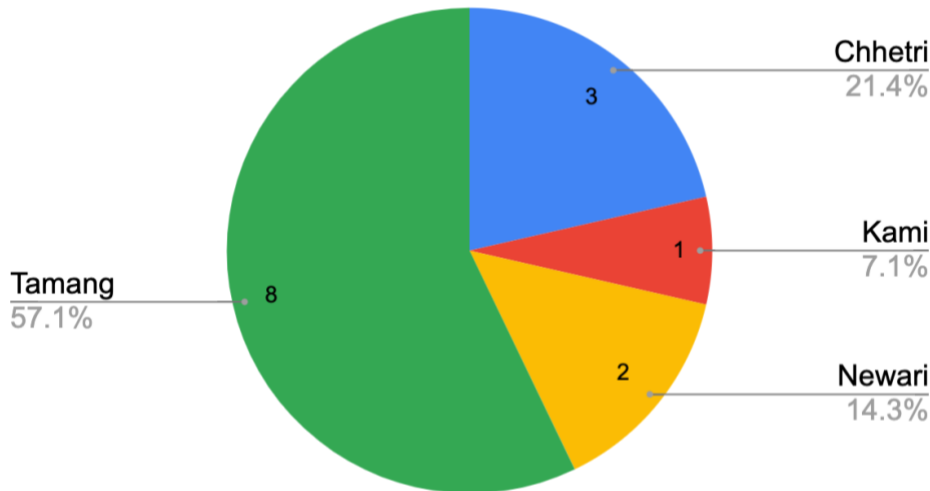
The spread of students by year in schooling shows that students who graduated 10+2 schooling had experienced higher secondary schooling both before *and* during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those students currently studying at Sidhi and in Kathmandu (represented by the red and yellow portions of the pie chart in Figure 4.2) were in Class 10 at the start of the pandemic, so they did not have any recollection of a seemingly “normal” or expected 10+2 schooling experience as a reference.

I spoke with a majority Tamang student population (57.1%) which aligns with the general demography of Sindhupalchowk district and this rural municipality, as mentioned in Chapter 3. In addition to the nine Tamang students, I interviewed three Chhetri students (21.4%), two Newari students (14.3%), and one Kami student (7.1%) (see Figure 4.3). Although ethnicity and

caste were not focal points of my research, there are oftentimes social dynamics attached to these forms of identity.

**Figure 4.3**

*Student Interviews by Ethnic Group*



### **Family Composition, Farming, and Educational Priorities**

To situate my findings in the context of this rural village area in Sindhupalchowk, here I describe the general family profiles, composition, and expected responsibilities of students living in this village. This will frame my findings of how students felt about balancing these responsibilities and the value of education.

#### *Family Composition & Farming*

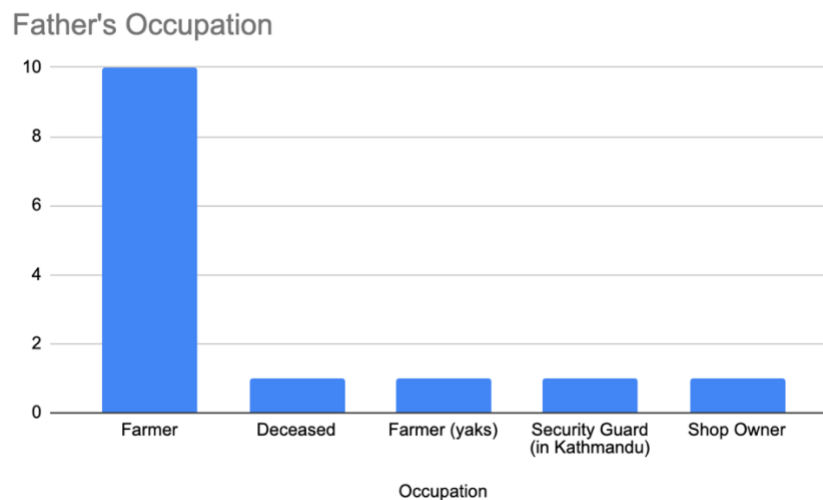
Drawing conclusions based on what would be an objective account of family size is difficult, as students differed in whether these numbers included both their nuclear family (parents and siblings) and extended family (grandparents and in-laws). Of the fourteen students I spoke with, the average student's family size was 6.2 family members. This is higher than the average family household size of 4.3 members in Sindhupalchowk district (RAP, 2019),

however, since students lived in joint families this could have skewed the average in comparison to census data that may reflect only nuclear family size.

Every student interviewed had at least one parent whose primary occupation was farming, except for one student whose parents were shop owners in the village. Nine students lived in households where both parents were farmers. Some students noted that they had siblings or family members who were working (oftentimes abroad) and contributed to their family economy through remittances. In Figures 4.4 and 4.5 below, yak farming is distinguished from other forms of farming to note one student's situation where his parents lived up in the hills with their yak pastures. His parents spent most of their time up in the yak pastures and were rarely home in the village. Two students also had one absent parent working abroad for an extended period who sent remittances home. One other student reported her father worked in Kathmandu as a security guard while she and her younger brother attended 10+2 school in the city. Every student's family relied on farming in some aspect, as even the student with parents who were

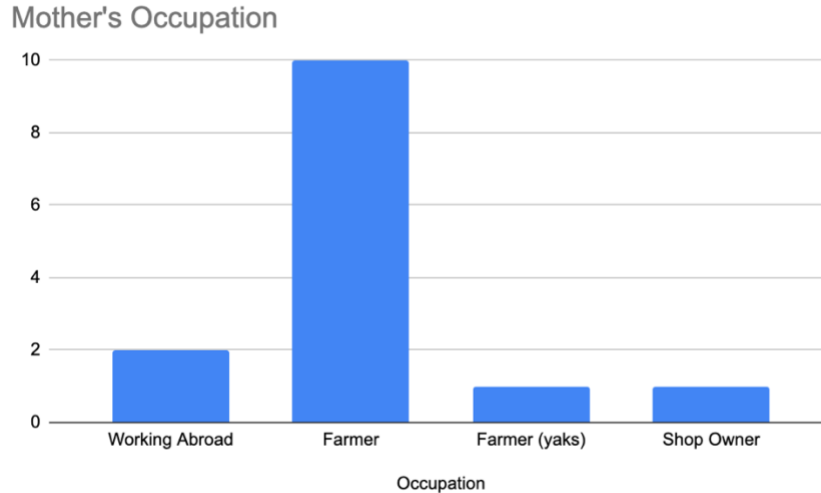
**Figure 4. 4**

*Father's Occupation as Reported by Students*



**Figure 4. 5**

*Mother's Occupation as Reported by Students*



both shop owners reported that their family also maintained fields.

Since rural subsistence households are shown to have higher interdependence amongst family members (Cole & Tamang, 1998), it was unsurprising that economic issues were reflected by many students in this study. Village teachers underscored the financial difficulties families faced in this area. Karuna Miss was a female, forty-year-old village member who had attended Namrata Secondary School when she was younger and then returned to teach after receiving her Bachelor's in Kathmandu. She had been a secondary school teacher at Namrata for fifteen years, and during my time in the village we had taught two classes together, so we were quite close. Karuna Miss was quite embedded in the village community and elaborated on the challenges facing families in giving their children a higher education: "Yes, it is very difficult. They do not have any extra income, they are farmers, farming, that is it. They suffer a lot in order to send them [to school]." Karuna Miss also confirmed the arduous tasks that were expected of children from a young age in the village to support their families:

In our village in the house children from a young age have housework, field work, garden work, to cut the grass...Doing the basic house chores, they do what they can. Not from when they are big, but from when they are small. Watching their younger siblings.... they do this kind of work.

As many villagers' livelihoods depend on farming, student responsibilities at home were crucial to household maintenance. Students' experiences of schooling in the village while juggling household and school responsibilities reveal the complexity of the commitments to their family and their education.

### *Educational Priorities*

Gayatri, a female 19-year-old student studying in Class 12 in Kathmandu, reflected on the challenges of juggling schoolwork and housework while in lower secondary school (ECD- Class 10) in the village. During festivals or other village events, there was not enough time to complete her homework and housework, so sometimes she would arrive at school late. Consequentially, she shared, "...there were many times I did not go to school on time and would reach school late and the teachers from school would turn us away." This punishment of being asked to return home may be a function of the strict discipline that is implemented across school systems in Nepal as a perceived way of teaching students about dedication, but it also, perhaps paradoxically, forces students like Gayatri to sacrifice their schoolwork during particularly busy family times.

Some teachers were critical of how students sacrificed their education because of obligations to their family unit. Anish Sir, a younger male teacher who had been at Namrata School for seven years, described his interpretation of 10+2 students' relationships with their families in terms of their parents' education levels. He stated, "The Plus 2 students' families are a little uneducated," and followed with, "They did not get the chance to study at home, their economic situation is weak, their educational situation is a little weak, they do not understand the

importance of the education, you have to do the work [at home].” Anish Sir’s reflections describe uneducated parents as ignorant, which is reflective of past development discourse that ascribed ignorance to the lack of cosmopolitan knowledge of more modern ways in villages (Pigg, 1992). Anish Sir not only linked the level of family education with the value placed on education but also posited that economic problems contributed to these dynamics of not prioritizing education. Later, when speaking about how students who were pursuing their 10+2 studies in the village managed their schedule, he mentioned this tension again:

It is their compulsion or obligation: in the morning they study, and in the afternoon, they do the household works. They must help with the housework, and so they work in the home. They give importance to that. But (laughs, speaking in English) education is a first priority, I think so, but- (begins in Nepali again) It is their compulsion or obligation, if they do not do the housework, then they will have weakness, they were economically weak so they must do work at home.

Anish Sir mentioned several times how parents’ low education levels prevented them from prioritizing education for their children, but also alluded to how these sentiments are closely associated with the family economy. An analysis of Nepal’s National Living Standards Survey over three periods (1995/96, 2003/04, and 2010/11) reported that the primary reason students (aged 6-24 years old) did not enroll in school was because parents did not want to send their children, and secondarily that they needed the help at home. Further investigation into these main reasons by consumption quintile indicated that those from lower consumption levels (which indicated higher poverty levels for this study) had a higher occurrence of reasoning that schools were too far away and expensive to send their children (S.B. Thapa, 2013). There have been other factors, such as family size, highlighted in similar literature exploring what may contribute to valuing education and the resulting aspirations of students. Divvying up resources amongst more household members can exacerbate financial difficulties and lead to further conflict in prioritizing education for families (Madjdian et al., 2021). These data would suggest that Anish

Sir may be correct: students might not be supported in their pursuits of 10+2 schooling due to the obligations to their families and their unstable economic situations.

However, the parents, students, and 10+2 teachers indicated that this was not at all the case. On the contrary, a 10+2 teacher at Sidhi Higher Secondary School said that it was precisely parents' lack of education that drove them to prioritize their children receiving a better education than they did. Deepson Sir, a younger male English teacher who had been working at Sidhi for two years, explained it this way:

Yeah, uh, in rural area most of the students are, most of the parents are uneducated, the students' parents are uneducated, and they dream and hope their children be a successful, educated and prestigious person. Even [if] they are educated, they feel and they hope that their children should be, we should make our children very successful, very educated, and prestigious person. Their dream was like that. Their dream like that, and family thought that, their children became responsible, thoughtful, and self-dependent person when they were in Plus 2 level, they are dependent, and thoughtful, and a responsible man, responsible person, thought like that to their children.

In contrast to Anish Sir's critical lens on the lack of education of parents affecting the values placed on schooling, Deepson Sir highlighted the fact that parents' dreams could be realized through the educational achievement of their children. Even though there are many economic difficulties that families face in sending their children to higher levels of schooling, sending a student to school is oftentimes prioritized as a way to promote a better life for their children. Considering the historical roots of education as a form of economic and social mobility in Nepal (Valentin, 2011), Deepson's Sir's views of education as an avenue toward affording a different life one's family aligns with previous notions of "modernity" and the value of education. Parents and other elders make sacrifices to ensure their children have opportunities they may have not experienced themselves.

It is often the case that attrition in formal schooling in Global South countries is attributed to poverty and parents' influence, as Anish Sir described. But this may be more a



function of rhetoric derived from policymakers or civil society from outside of these communities than a reflection of those communities' realities (Thorsen, 2007). The importance of freeing children from parents' past suffering has been observed in rural, subsistence farming communities in Peru as well, where families were found to see education as protection against the hardships of living reliant on the land (Crivello, 2011). My conversations with teachers reflected both these perspectives, as well as conversations with parents.

The importance of education was reflected in parents' discourse about how they felt about sending their children to 10+2 schooling. The parents of one male student who attended Sidhi clearly prioritized their children's studies. I asked the mother, Aamaa (*Āmā*), what was important to her, and she replied that it was important for her children to be educated. When I asked the same question to a female Sidhi student's father, Buwaa (*Buvā*), a farmer living in the lower Namrata village, he described:

What is important to us is studies, I wish that our health condition becomes good, that our children have the opportunity to study, the opportunity to work, those things are important and also that somehow, hardly, we manage living as subsistence farmers.

Although the education levels of these parents were unknown, they both emphasized the importance of education opportunities and commitments for their children. The latter part of Buwaa's response revealed the economic motivations he had for his farming household, as he wanted to be able to make ends meet as a farmer and secure opportunities for his children to work. Here, both Aamaa and Buwaa reveal sentiments that their children's educations will result in economic benefits, or otherwise translate into better conditions for their family.

Students also recounted how their families prioritized their education despite their own suffering, but this will be expanded upon in more detail in Chapter 5. Student accounts of how their family valued education reveal a deeper layer of obligation to family that was a key finding

of my research. Next, I consult what the 10+2 application process was like, and how the importance of education and family were expressed through these decisions.

## **The Process of Applying to 10+2**

### *Applying and Admissions*

After completing the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in Nepal, students receive their official certificate and assess where they are eligible and can afford to attend. SEE results are crucial for student admission, as higher marks can gain students admission to better schools and forms of financial aid. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this process for the four students I interviewed who experienced 10+2 schooling only during the pandemic. In 2020 the SEE exam was canceled and internal exam scores were used for students to gain entry into 10+2 schools instead.

In general, students reported navigating the 10+2 admissions process alone, and several explicitly noted that they did not receive any support from teachers or family members. I had anticipated that students and families would have to navigate an onerous application process before enrolling in 10+2. However, students did not mention filling out any physical forms or applications until they were committing to attend their school of choice. Many students simply received their secondary school certificate and visited the institution directly to gain admission. The process of discovering and deciding where to study proved to be difficult, as students had to navigate the admissions system and processes largely on their own.

Since the student research participants attended one, or at most two, rural government schools in their entire schooling experience up until the point of considering 10+2 schools, quite a bit of guidance and connections would be assumed necessary to consider 10+2 schools outside of Taji rural municipality. I found that students utilized social connections from the village to

gain knowledge about prospective schools. There was an annual regional educational learning fair in the village area that in the year 2018 had 10+2 college representatives attend from Kathmandu to recruit students. During my year teaching at Namrata, I attended the learning fair and observed this recruiting, and can mainly recall representatives distributing pamphlets and describing the desirable aspects of their colleges to Class 10 students. In interviews, three students mentioned that the learning fair was where they first heard about the 10+2 school where they ended up studying. Other students mentioned they decided to study at their chosen 10+2 school because family members or close friends also studied there or knew about the admission process. This was one of the first instances of social connections aiding students in the process of 10+2 schooling, which I will expand upon in greater detail in Chapter 7.

*Sidhi or Kathmandu? (Affordability or Quality?)*

While the learning fair and familial connections were instrumental in spreading awareness about the colleges in Kathmandu, the choices students faced in where to study indicated the importance of financial affordability, the overall economic impact on their families, and the reputation of schools for discipline and quality education.

Two of the students in this study enrolled at Sidhi Higher Secondary School, and each studied one of the two offered subjects: education and business management. The general student population at Sidhi Higher Secondary School was described by one of their 10+2 schoolteachers as "...from Tamang community, they are some of them are from other community, some of them are from poor family background, very poor..." I spoke with one Tamang student and one Chhetri student who attended Sidhi and were living in different villages. All the students who attended Sidhi would commute to school and back home every day, except for one student who lived on the school grounds because his family was in a faraway village. Both students I spoke

with commuted daily to school on foot or by the public bus that would sometimes transport students.

The remainder of the students in my study attended 10+2 school in the northeastern quadrant of Kathmandu and pursued subjects including business management, education, computer science, civil engineering, law, and humanities. Schools varied in being private or public, and the distance from school varied from a 10-minute short walk and bus ride to an hour-long walk. Students reported living in a rented room or flat in Kathmandu with extended or nuclear family members, their peers, or alone.

Several factors arose in student discourse on school choice that revealed the value of education, but ultimate dedication to family. Karuna Miss, a secondary school teacher in the village, summed up the challenges of affording education in the city for students:

While staying in Kathmandu the parent's money suffers, they have to make money for their children to live in Kathmandu, some people rent a room, some people stay with their family and relatives, they have to pay the rent, they have to pay the fees for college, and they suffer a lot, they have to send money from their home for rice and food stuffs.

These issues of affordability of schooling in Kathmandu were mentioned by most students, but when I asked them why they did not decide to study at Sidhi School instead, many relayed that physical access and the lack of subjects offered were deterring factors. Aahana (19-year-old, female) had just finished her 10+2 schooling in the city when she explained: "At that time, that time the college was far, ma'am. It was in Sidhi, you would have to walk by foot [to school], and you would have to come [back home] by foot. Realizing it would be hard, everyone goes to study in Kathmandu." Several other students highlighted the fact that they would be walking one hour by foot to and from school every day as a key contributor to their decision to study in Kathmandu.

Another issue for students was the range of subjects offered at each school, as Sidhi School only offered two subjects. Insight from students indicated that they desired greater variety of subjects not only for their individual interests, but to benefit their family as well. For instance, Kumar, a 20-year-old man, explained that his father wanted him to pursue engineering, which was not possible in the village. “There [at Sidhi] they do not offer my subject. I went to Plus 2 for science, I joined Class 11 & 12 to receive a civil engineering diploma and up there around the villages there is no engineering subject offered, so I was compelled (*bādhya*) to come to Kathmandu to study.” Kumar’s feelings of obligation to study in the city could have been influenced by his parents’ pressures to study engineering coupled with the limited options in the village. Even Preeti (19 years old, female), who knowingly chose to study in the village, expressed bitterness about the lack of subjects and practical education at Sidhi:

Now I am studying in Plus 2, and how my studying is going I don’t know but here the village Plus 2 is ok. If I went to Kathmandu there would be more options, here in the village there are two faculty, there is only education and management, nothing else is available.... And in Kathmandu there is more practical education available, whereas in the village there is no practical study. Here we just study, just read theoretical books, there is only a little that is applied.

Preeti and Kumar’s desires for greater variety of subjects in the village reflects the value of making decisions for their family, whether because they had to honor their parents’ wishes or understood that a more practical education would allow them better opportunities for the future.

Working while studying in the city and the affordability of migrating to Kathmandu to study was highlighted as a large challenge for students, but also, simultaneously, as a source of opportunity. A large factor that contributed to 19-year-old Gayatri’s decision to study in Kathmandu was the fact that it gave her employment options, whereas in the village there were no such options to earn money to help cover school costs. The only paid work in the village would include being a small shop owner or a teacher, neither of which were accessible to

students. In comparison to schooling up until Class 10, which is “free” and only requires small fees for exams, 10+2 schooling is understood to be considerably more expensive. My conversation with Karuna Miss confirmed the higher expenses for upper secondary schooling.

**Karuna Miss:** Yes, yes there are fees. Until 9, 10 it is all free, it does not cost money.

**Grace:** Ay, yes. And for the tuition classes<sup>11</sup> you also have to give money.

**Karuna Miss:** There are small fees incurred. In Class 9 & 10 there are small fees, and the fees for exams as well, it is not that much but in higher secondary school there are lots of fees.

And later, she shared that in 10+2 schooling, “...you have to pay for tiffin [lunch], notebooks, uniform, shoes, bags, it’s all very expensive.” As noted in Chapter 2, there are high direct and indirect costs to households for 10+2 schooling, and limited opportunities to generate money to cover these costs from the village. Forced migration to Kathmandu because of limited resources in students’ places of origin has been explored in studies on education to work transitions of students (Basnet et al., 2021b), however, there are structural limitations that students, particularly rural, low caste, and low socioeconomic status, face in truly being able to succeed in their studies because of the need to find work and forms of discrimination (Basnet et al., 2021a).

Even for Prajit (19 years old, male), who received two scholarships as he entered 10+2 schooling, it was difficult to afford living expenses in the city. This changed the course of his Plus 2 study, as he had to get a job to manage the extra costs of living in Kathmandu.

**Prajit:** (In English) You know ma’am, I had studied science with Kriti<sup>12</sup>, at three months.

**Grace:** (In Nepali) Uh, I remember.

**Prajit:** (In English) But, I want to job so....so I am in management.

**Grace:** (In Nepali) Ay why, can you not arrange to work while studying science?

**Prajit:** (In English) No ma’am, yes. I had to work job. (In Nepali) You know Kathmandu ma’am.

**Grace:** I know.

**Prajit:** You have to pay the fare for your room.

**Grace:** Yeah, and you have to pay for food.

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<sup>11</sup> Tuition classes are extra classes offered by schools, oftentimes associated with secondary schooling. They are not required but desirable and more often require extra payment that goes directly to teachers themselves.

<sup>12</sup> Kriti is my host sister and studied science at the same 10+2 school as Prajit.

**Prajit:** For food, for your room. For other things, (in English) no any support so I had joined job.

**Grace:** (in Nepal) Yeah, you also had two scholarships, like-

**Prajit:** (in English) Scholarship only for colleges.

**Grace:** Ay tuition? Fees?

**Prajit:** Yes, only for fees no another, problems.

Prajit was very expressive in his disappointment of needing to switch concentrations, as he later lamented that science was a much more interesting and practical subject to study. Nearly two decades beforehand, the same issue of lack of comprehensive support for students' studies in the medical field or sciences was reflected in a village teacher's experience. Back when Karuna Miss, a secondary teacher at Namrata School, was of 10+2 schooling age she sacrificed her desire to study nursing because of her family's financial issues and chose to teach instead. Karuna Miss had even been offered a scholarship to support her studies but recounted that there were still many hardships that her family endured, and they could not support her nursing career aspirations. This was absorbed by both Karuna Miss and her parents, as she relayed:

**Karuna Miss:** My parents suffered a lot because they feel, my daughter cannot study her first [choice] so they felt sad.

**Grace:** Ay yes. Lots of, er, at that time you had lots of challenges.

**Karuna Miss:** Yes. In my life there were lots of challenges, there were four of us siblings, and we all went to private boarding school, all of us, my sisters and brothers and me. And when I was in college, my father was the only one with a salary so it was very difficult then, and so to send me to school it was very hard for my father.

The fact that these issues continue to face students nearly two decades later is problematic for the advancement of students through education in Nepal and into better careers. This also indicates that those with financial capabilities are more likely to succeed in pursuing their desired subjects and fields of interest. Receiving a scholarship that does not cover ancillary expenses may lead to heightened sacrifice and feelings of indebtedness between families and students. This was

apparent through Karuna Miss' discussion of her parents' continued sacrifices and Prajit's frustrations in switching subjects to be able to simultaneously work.

The majority of students did not receive a scholarship to study 10+2 schooling, so to afford the costs of living, they had to rely on family members, loans, or to work themselves. I did not press students on the details of how they paid for their schooling because of the potential sensitivity of this topic, but through interview discussions I was able to deduce that a major source of support for their education came from family members working abroad. Sagar Sir, the elder brother of Shanti (19 years old), talked about how his household managed the absence of his sister and the expenses of her education in Kathmandu:

She would do a little housework at home, and when we sent her for her studies [in Kathmandu] my father and I would do her housework, and for the small payments and expenses our older sister would cover them, that's how it was arranged.

Sagar Sir's older sister had married and was living and making money in India, so remittances sent back to her family were helping her younger sister afford 10+2 schooling. While many students' families worked as farmers, five students named family members who worked abroad, and three students had family working in Kathmandu and the village, respectively. Even though students' family composition and economy may have not been entirely conducive to monetarily supporting their pursuits of education in Kathmandu, students and their families realized the long-term benefits of investing in their education. Therefore, they made certain accommodations to manage their education in Kathmandu.

As mentioned previously, another form of monetary support were scholarships and tuition discounts, but beyond their lack of comprehensive support they indicated how students without social capital were deprived of opportunity. There was a distinction between scholarships and discounts on tuition, as most students mentioned that there were no scholarship



resources available to them, yet when asked if they received some form of a discount sometimes confirmed that they did. While four students mentioned that they received tuition discounts at their schools of choice, only two students received scholarships to cover their total costs of tuition for 10+2 schooling, both of whom were male. Kaya, a 19-year-old studying in Kathmandu, described how much the scholarship facilitated his 10+2 education.

It was my desire to study up to Plus 2, it was my interest and so I told my family “I want to study Plus 2, but where will I study? I will study in Kathmandu I told this to my family and they understood, but for studying I will have expenses for things and where will that money come from? We are economically weak and what will we do, how will we manage? So, I applied for the ASSIST scholarship (pseudonym), and uh after applying my name was chosen, I was chosen for the scholarship and it was enough to cover my studying, and then the outside room/apartment rate and other expenses were covered by my family. My home paid for that, so that is it, if I did not receive a scholarship then economically there would have been many problems. Because I received the scholarship I had little economic problems, so it was solved.

Kaya came from a family of ten, where his parents were farmers and two of his older siblings were working abroad. Without this scholarship support, Kaya would not have been able to afford Plus 2 schooling in Kathmandu. For Prajit (19 years old), on top of his family being subsistence farmers and having very little income, his family life was unstable, so he needed to find support through a scholarship. Prajit explained, “(In English) [My] father is a drunkard...and Mom, Mom supportive or too supportive but (speaking in Nepali) what are the things in the village that can support me? There is only the farming work, only enough to feed yourself.” Prajit’s experience underscores the importance of assessing each student’s home life, as not every student reflected having a supportive and safe family dynamic. Considering both Prajit and Kaya’s familial landscapes and economic hardships, these scholarship awards were necessary for them to continue their studies on to 10+2 schooling. When I investigated how these scholarships were accessible to these students, it became increasingly more apparent that social capital and social connections are the most recognized avenue toward receiving financial assistance.

Both Kaya and Prajit expressed deep gratitude to those that helped them through the application process. Since Kaya's family suffered from many economic problems, he thanked a secondary school Teach for Nepal (TFN) teacher for helping him navigate the application process. TFN is a two-year fellowship for Nepal's young professionals and Bachelor graduates to work in government schools to create equitable change in the education system in harder-to-reach areas (TFN, 2019).

(Speaking in English) Yes. Uh, because for the scholarship we need to apply application. And application, Saraswoti Miss help to me to apply for application, because I have no ideas on that time. Because how to apply, where is the locations of that office, ASSIST office, I don't know. Uh, she help, totally she help me. And I want to say thank you so much, Saraswoti Miss.

Without the help of Saraswoti Miss who was already connected to scholarship schemes and resources as a TFN fellow, Kaya would not have even known that this scholarship opportunity existed. Personal connections were thus a huge form of support in facilitating the financial awards for both Kaya and Prajit, and some of the students who received tuition discounts.

Another student noted that a TFN connection helped her receive a 10+2 tuition discount. Prajit received both an ASSIST award and another scholarship from a different foundation, and shared:

What was most helpful, (in English) no any helpers but my brother. My brother gives me, gives me motivation you know motivation. Motivation, you study best, I will help you, some motivation uh my brother gives me.

And then later,

**Prajit:** (In English) And, I had also for scholarship forms with ASSIST and Sansaar Foundation (pseudonym), so I had to give their interview. (In Nepali) And I won their hearts at ASSIST. I danced, I sang, and I gave good answers to their questions, (in English), so ASSIST say your confidence level are very high. So proud to be you. So, I had a scholarship. And ASSIST and Sansaar Foundation is also helpful for my study. And Man Bahadur Sir also helpful for my study.

**Grace:** Ay those were supportive.

**Prajit:** My brother, Sansaar Foundation, and Man Bahadur Sir is my full supportive person.

Prajit's initial accolades to his brother for his encouragement highlight the importance of family in educational decisions and pathways forward. His mention of Man Bahadur Sir, however, who was the Taji municipality mayor at the time, further underscores the power of social connections and social capital in attaining financial assistance. The scholarships that Prajit and Kaya received were private scholarships from non-profit organizations that operated in the village area. Based on Prajit's description of the interview process where he was able to showcase his personality and Kaya's discourse on his family's economic struggles, it appears that these scholarships were awarded based on a combination of need, perceived merit, and social connections.

When choosing a 10+2 school, not many students focused on factors that would affect their enjoyment of studying, such as the atmosphere, student body, teachers, or extracurricular activities. Prajit (who received two scholarships) was one of the only students who noted that he enjoyed the environment on campus when he visited. Rather, most students' decisions revolved mainly around finances (both immediate and future) and their school's reputation. Several students mentioned that the government 10+2 school options in Kathmandu were cheaper in comparison to the private schools, and that tighter discipline at schools was a draw to enroll. Two female students mentioned that the reputation of their college being "well known" or having a good track record drew their affinity for the school. The disparity in the quality and price of education between private schools and public, government schools is a well-researched issue in Nepal, especially because private schools have historically been unregulated and are perceived as avenues toward modernity (Thapa, 2015). While this issue will not be expanded upon in detail, it is notable that affordability, quality of schooling, and family expectations were factored into students' school choices.

This chapter first introduced the students who participated in this study, their basic family composition, and how they arrived at their 10+2 school choice. Although most students came from subsistence farming families, their parents supported them continuing into 10+2 schooling, mainly because they perceived that it would provide opportunities for their children that they themselves were not afforded. The 10+2 admissions process revealed the foundational values that students held toward their schooling, mainly to 1) reduce economic burdens on their families, while also 2) obtaining a higher-quality education. The issue of financial affordability also guided students' decisions in the admissions process and revealed how social connections aided two students in connecting to financial aid. In the following chapter, the value of education will be explored through students' experiences and perceived responsibilities through 10+2, as students recounted what it was like for them once they began higher secondary schooling in Kathmandu and in Sidhi.

## CHAPTER 5: THE VALUE OF FAMILY, THROUGH EDUCATION

**Preeti:** For me studying is very important.

**Grace:** Why? Why is it important?

**Preeti:** Because, because if I cannot study then now what work can you do, you need studies for whatever work you do, and therefore, also for speaking, for making money, for whatever work you do you need education, so my education is important.

**Grace:** Uh yes, yes. And what is important to your family?

**Preeti:** For my family, uh I do not know (laughs).

**Grace:** That's ok.

**Preeti:** For my family as well, for us children to study and money, that's it.

- A conversation with Preeti (19 years old, female) who studied in Class 12 at Sidhi School

Instead of responsibilities to school and family coming into conflict as students pursued higher secondary schooling, I found that they viewed both of these sets of responsibilities as complementary and even coterminous at times. As illustrated in my conversation with Preeti above, students' commitments to their studies were justified because they would ultimately be benefitting their families in the near to distant future. These benefits would accrue through better job prospects, which would create economic advantages for the whole family. In this way, the family was imagined as collectively advancing through one student's pursuit of education. Students missed their families dearly in the transition to 10+2 schooling in the city, and still relied on them for support, so the collective advancement really was a collaborative effort in many ways. In this chapter, I expand upon the value of family as it relates to 10+2 students' decisions to pursue higher education.

### **Heightened Responsibilities, Not Conflicting Responsibilities**

When I investigated the degree to which responsibilities to home and school conflicted while students were in 10+2 schooling, I found that students did not describe juggling them as a conflict. Instead, students talked about heightened responsibilities while studying 10+2—not just

in the sense that they now had more responsibilities than before, but that they had a *different* set of responsibilities arising from the high value they and their families placed on education, and ultimately family. Conflicts that arose were a result of economic pressures rather than tensions between the mutually exclusive responsibilities to education and family, as I had originally predicted.

On a community level, people recognized that entering Class 11 and Class 12 came with expectations around increased maturity and leadership. Deepson Sir was a teacher at Sidhi School and described the societal expectations that 10+2 students faced in the village when they are asked to balance both family obligations with school responsibilities.

(In English) Yeah, uh Plus 2 students represents the senior student of the school. They are known as senior student and they are known as responsible student, as their parent to another student. They have to teach good manners, good things, so when they enter into Plus 2 they feel mature, they have to feel mature. Their subject matter is also like that. And, uh, that subject matter guides to the profession. And when they enter, when they have to enter into any profession they should be mature and their feeling will be mature everything will be mature and in their family they help their families in their work, household work and agriculture and in community they are also known as mature person and responsible person in the society, like their parent. If their parent have to go to any meeting or work, they can send their children also. Like that, the children are as mature as their parent, they feel. Society feel like that when they enter into Plus 2, and there will be there is after 16 17 they are known as mature person in the society.

Students felt pressures of maturity and responsibility while entering 10+2 schooling in the city as well, as they navigated new territory and deliberated over their future. Nisha (19 years old, female) was answering a question about what she would change about her 10+2 schooling experience when she referenced the beginning transition to 10+2 schooling and expectations in decision-making.

When in school you feel small/like a child, from Plus 2 you have to do things yourself, you feel mature.<sup>13</sup> Around the time of Plus 2, from Class 11 you have to be mature and then you have to think about your future, what are you going to do, how are you going to do it, what will you become....

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<sup>13</sup> Nisha used the English word “young” in this conversation, but in this context the meaning of it is mature.

Here, Nisha also felt the societal pressure of being more mature in 10+2 schooling. Although not stated explicitly, her future and what she will “become” ultimately links back to her family.

The term *jimmewari* (*jim'mēvārī*) means responsibility in Nepali, and students often used this term to capture larger expectations and responsibilities they experienced toward their families. Housework responsibilities for one student attending 10+2 school in the village at Sidhi were exacerbated by the long commute to the village school. Preeti, a bright 19-year-old girl studying education in Class 12, wrote in a form response about her struggles of walking one hour to Sidhi. She felt very tired from the commute and could not focus on her education. While studying she also had housework to do, and she noted that it was difficult since time and money were limited. Although she was able to go to school on the bus at times, she had to pay money for the bus fare. These conflicts differ from what I anticipated in conflicting responsibilities because instead of Preeti's responsibilities to education and family as being mutually exclusive, Preeti highlighted how economic struggles affected both her schoolwork and housework. In tandem with her earlier reflections in this chapter on how important education was for her and her family, her largest concerns were how her choice to pursue schooling in the village affected her quality of education but also her family's limited economic situation.

The other Sidhi studying student, Pemba, was 19 years old and denied a scholarship to study in Kathmandu so he could study business management at Sidhi, which was a clear advantage in his eyes. I received a little peek into Pemba's daily routine when I arranged an interview with his yak-farming mother in the early morning hours. Pemba had climbed the hill behind his village home to meet his mother at the grazing pasture to help her care for their family's yaks. While she milked the yaks, he would help cut grass or care for the nearly twenty yaks and then quickly walk back down the hill to home to prepare to go to school. His mother

and father lived with their livestock for most of the time, so it was just him and his younger sister living in the village. However, balancing homework or other school and home responsibilities was not highlighted as a challenge. Pemba noted that there were not many responsibilities, saying:

**Pemba:** Yeah responsibilities (laughs). Uh, I study, I do not make all the foods, so there is not very much (to do).

**Grace:** Ayy yeah and you do not have to watch after your little sister?

**Pemba:** My little sister (laughs) she is only a little bit younger than me, and she makes the things, makes the tea, does that sort of work. So now there is not a lot of work.

Pemba described that his sister cooked food for the most part and that he did not have much to worry about in the sense of responsibilities. Interestingly, he did not define these daily farm work tasks as responsibilities, which could indicate that farming work is considered an obligation and not an added responsibility. (It is also pertinent to note gendered differences in work tasks at home as reflected in Pemba's story, where girls are expected to complete domestic household chores and childcare, while boys are expected to complete farm work (Hughes et al., 2020)). While Pemba and his sister's daily tasks do reflect the dynamics of gendered daily chores in the household, none of the other students I spoke with seemed to engage in these delineated gendered roles. The composition of this village being mainly Tamang could also contribute to these more muted gendered dynamics, as research on Tamang communities has shown that egalitarianism and acceptance can be more present in Tamang villages and households (Cole & Tamang, 1998). For both Pemba and Preeti, while studying at Sidhi the largest changes to their responsibilities were a longer commute that made it difficult to prioritize their education and family simultaneously.

While the nature of responsibilities for students in Kathmandu differed, they did not express feeling any ethical conflicts in not being present to do physical work at home while



studying in the city. Instead, they voiced a different set of responsibilities for heightened educational pathways. My conversation with Gayatri, a 19-year-old female student in Class 12 in Kathmandu, elucidated this shift in responsibility when she started 10+2 schooling.

**Gayatri:** At that time [in Class 10] I had my own responsibilities, at home my mother was sick and my father as well, and they could not do the work and therefore all of the work I had to do myself.

**Grace:** Ayy I understand. And then your schoolwork, like you have to do homework, give exams, take classes, do you also have those responsibilities?

**Gayatri:** Yes, those are also responsibilities. Do your homework, do your studies, get a good job, they are very big responsibilities, miss.

**Grace:** Ah yes. So, while studying at higher secondary, that Neptune College (pseudonym) are your school responsibilities and home, village responsibilities a little different?

**Gayatri:** It is very different, Miss. Village responsibilities while studying in school, there were scholarships available to pay school fees, and because the government schools would pay it would not be difficult, so compared to the village there are many responsibilities at Neptune College, because every month you have to continuously pay fees, and when exams come you have to continuously pay the exam fees, for that reason the responsibility is that you have to study very well.

**Grace:** Ayy yes. It is different.

**Gayatri:** Different miss, it is very different.

**Grace:** Now you are studying in your second year at Neptune College, and now your exams are coming. And your family is living in the village. So, now what is the biggest responsibility that you feel?

**Gayatri:** For me, the biggest responsibilities now are to study well, give good exams, get good marks.

**Grace:** Ayy yes because you must get a good job?

**Gayatri:** Yes if I receive good marks, I will get a job quickly, I will get a good job. Now if I don't get marks and I fail then I will have to repeat Class 12 and while studying I will need to search for money, I will also lose time and that is it.

**Grace:** Ay yes you feel large amounts of work.

**Gayatri:** Uh, I have and feel very big work miss.

**Grace:** Wah, I did not know. In higher secondary school, there are lots of big responsibilities.

**Gayatri:** Uh, compared to school before, there are bigger responsibilities in management college.

After describing how she felt large responsibilities to do well in school and get a job, Gayatri's lasting comment on the responsibilities in 10+2 schooling feeling greater indicates that especially for students who migrate for their studies there is a higher degree of sacrifice committed to their

education, heightening its importance. Instead of feeling in conflict about being absent at home, Gayatri noted that she felt a greater obligation to her studies to earn good marks and get a good job. This pressure to translate education into economic benefits all within a correct chronological period of time is reminiscent of the ideology behind mass schooling. One component of formal schooling is the emphasis on chronological age and corresponding maturity through schooling, and not falling behind (Valentin, 2011). Gayatri mentioned that she could not afford to repeat Grade 12, which indicates that economic tensions accompany the pressures to complete schooling within an expected timeline. While students were fueled by their desires to benefit their family through a better education, conflict crept into students' educational pathways in the form of economic pressures. This was especially expressed by students who moved to the city and were forced to work a job while studying to afford the higher costs of their 10+2 education.

For those students who did work simultaneously while studying, they voiced resentment over the time they lost in dedication to their studies because of these outside responsibilities. The degree of these responsibilities and hardships varied based on family conditions and support, as can be seen from Ajay's (18 years old, male) situation of working in a carpet factory to support his family while also supporting his educational pursuits.

You have to live far from home, and now I have a job to work, and go to college, and 12 hours I have to work and send money back home, and also give money for college, money is scarce. I'm getting the pressure from home to quit studying, they say I should drop out and quit school.

Even for students backed by family support, they found that seeking employment to offset the financial burden of their education still posed challenges. Gayatri, who described heightened responsibilities in 10+2 schooling above, commuted 30 minutes by bus to Neptune College, attended her 10+2 classes, left at 1:30 pm to go home for lunch, then worked for a money-raising organization until the evening time. The tradeoffs Gayatri made to afford her education were

clear here, as she left school one period early to work and afford her education in the city.

Alternately, these sacrifices made to students' education were a deterring factor against working a job for several students. Kumar (20 years old, male) stated this clearly:

**Kumar:** If I did a job, then my studies would be broken/disturbed. If studies are broken, then life is broken (laughs) (*Job garyō bhanē mērō paḍhā'i brigrincha. Paḍhā'i bigriyō bhanē, life brigrinchā*).

**Grace:** Yeah ay.

**Kumar:** Now I have not done a job.

**Grace:** Ay yes because for a job time-

**Kumar:** I do not have [enough] time with me, now.

Kumar makes the distinct link here to the success in his studies and his overall life, as he voiced that he did not have enough time to both work and study under the concern that his studies would suffer. A study done on the school to work transitions of rural students working at a call center in Kathmandu highlighted how they justified working while studying (Basnet, 2022). Working and education were viewed as mutually beneficial, in the way they allowed rural youth to afford their education and provide for their family. Basnet (2022) noted that for students, working while studying, "...was to financially sustain themselves when they are still on their way to achieve their educational goals that would lead to pathways and links to jobs they aspire to have (p. 8)." This is reflected both in the narratives from students working while studying in my sample, but also by students who could not sacrifice their education to work simultaneously. This tension demonstrates the conflicts that exist in pursuing a quality education with longer-term value for one's family alongside its immediate economic impacts and hardships for the student. Whereas students' tangible responsibilities to farming and household duties and their schoolwork did not come into conflict as much as I had anticipated, the emphasis on educational pathways as benefitting the family was much more pronounced than I had anticipated it might be.

## Foundational Values

Like the embeddedness of students in their families' farms and housework, it appears that children also become absorbed in responsibilities to contribute to their family economy after they finished their education. Amidst the early morning sounds at her family's yak pasture, Aamaa, the mother of a Sidhi School student, expressed a similar desire for her children to contribute to the family economy.

**Grace:** What do you think your children should do after they finish their studies?

**Aamaa:** They should start looking for work, and work (hear clinking of bells and rooster crowing in background).

**Grace:** Oh yes, work. And, work in the village or in Kathmandu or where, which place?

**Aamaa:** I don't know, just a good, good... hey young son over there! (Trails off as she talks to son)

While Aamaa did not seem to care where her children studied, her desire for them to work echoes Buwaa's hopes mentioned in Chapter 4 for his children to find work to help their family make ends meet and echoes the ideals of achieving upward economic mobility through education. The ideology of education as an avenue toward "modernity" is apparent here, as education is valued for its perceived economic and social results of obtaining a job.

Anthropologist Sara Dickey (2002) argues that in India, upward mobility is interlinked with family support. Dickey (2002) highlights how the family is a determiner of class in India because individuals are judged by their families' standing in Indian society, but also because the family plays a large role in determining social and economic routes for every member through pooling resources (p. 217). Some tensions can emerge as family economies and class become interlinked, such as the educational pathways for a young woman in India becoming strained when her father suffers a life-altering injury and can no longer work (Dickey, 2002). While there are differences in Nepali and Indian societies, there are some overarching similarities in South Asian collectivist orientations. These ideals are apparent in the discourse surrounding the value

of education and family as reflected by family members, and most notably by students themselves, in my study.

I asked students to reflect on how they and their families felt when they first started 10+2 schooling. An overwhelming number of responses from students relayed feeling happy, but they also frequently talked about how their parents urged them to do well in their studies. The phrases, “*raamro sanga paDha (rāmrō saṅga paḍha)*” (study well) and “*thulo manche banne (thulō mānchē bannē)*” (be an important person) and variations were used repeatedly by nine students (both Sidhi and Kathmandu students) to describe what their families thought when they began their 10+2 studies. *Thulo manchhe* (important person) has often been defined as a term associated with the rural elite and indicates those with social power and respect (Brøgger, 2019). While most people might achieve *thulo manchhe* status through *afnomanchhe* (social connections or inheritance), in the context that students shared this phrase, the route to becoming *thulo manchhe* was through hard work and dedication to their studies. Accompanying a sense of parental pride was, therefore, the pressure for students to translate their dedication to their studies into rewarding work later, to become important people—a status that would, at least to some extent, adhere to the entire family if the student achieved it. Hence, the compulsion that students felt to migrate to Kathmandu was considered justifiable as an avenue for greater family upward mobility, especially when compared to the village Sidhi School. I asked Kumar, a 20-year-old male student studying engineering in Kathmandu, about his parents’ opinions. His response reflected these deeper obligations to his family.

**Kumar:** Mm their thoughts were this, now you have to study yourself and do well and pass, and from that you may get a good job, they said that.

**Grace:** Mm yes, and at that time what did you think?

**Kumar:** They support us even though there is not a good financial situation, no? Dad Mom say that if you study well now in the future after you get a job, you won’t suffer like us.

Here, Kumar's familial expectations to perform well in school were a manifestation of larger expectations his parents had for him to get a good job, become successful, and have a life different from his parents. These expectations to mitigate suffering are two-fold and both reflexive and forward-thinking, as there exists the pressure for students to perform well and succeed to honor the sacrifices that parents have made to give them such an opportunity, but also to mitigate future suffering for the whole family. These obligation dynamics have been explored in literature focused on immigrant households in the United States, namely Asian Americans (Trieu, 2016). Research has found that parental expectations as they are defined through structural circumstances of economic need and cultural practice play a large role in influencing Southeast Asian students' feelings of obligation to their families (Trieu, 2016). Against the backdrop of limited finances in subsistence households, as well as the history of the value of education and intergenerational dynamics of exchange and care, we begin to see how students and families view young adults' education as a collective enterprise.

The value of education is woven throughout many students' discourse but is tied to the suffering of families, expectations to do differently, and the pressure to make money and be successful later in life. Family suffering seems to be at the crux of these pressures to study well and get a job or become a "big" or "important" person. Success later in life becomes contingent on students' achievement of education, which is similar to the rhetoric that was emphasized in promoting education as "enlightenment" and upward movement from the traditional during the Panchayat era, or the ideals of achieving "modernity" (Caddell, 2007; Pigg, 1992). This was also observed through Skinner and Holland's (1996) longitudinal study on a Nepali village where both students and parents idealized education as a path to a new life and out of the "darkness" of being uneducated (p. 282). Intergenerational considerations of past suffering and measures to

mitigate future suffering through education were present and permeated students' educational experiences through 10+2. Many more student responses to my questions about what they valued and aspired toward placed their family at the forefront.

Intergenerational care is oftentimes an expectation in Nepali society, as was mentioned in Chapter 2, where both monetary and physical care support is expected of children for their parent's generation. Students spoke of these responsibilities more implicitly, as Nisha, a 19-year-old female student who had just finished 10+2 schooling, shared she hoped to take care of her family and their happiness:

What things are the most important to me what my family wants, very much. To choose to make them very happy, whatever dreams I am pursuing if they are complete then I will make my parents happy. My wish is for my father to not do any work, for him to take full rest, today I will make this happen, (in English) keeping happier with my family, that is it.

While gender is a large factor in intergenerational care roles in Nepal, both female and male students expressed the desire to provide for their family and take care of them in the future.

Not all students had families who valued education in the way they hoped. Ajay, for instance, spoke with a more critical tone about what his family found important, which he attributed to the fact that they did not fully support or understand his pursuit of upper secondary schooling because of their "inconsequential" occupations as farmers. Ajay was an 18-year-old male student in his second year of 10+2 schooling in Kathmandu. Ajay shared, "My family has a small income, so they are saying that I should drop out of studies, I already studied up until Class 10, and that is enough, for a low-income family like us." However, when asked I asked him what was important to him personally, Ajay replied: "In my life I want to make my whole family and my parents happy. Even more than studying, I want to make my parents happy and even if I suffer, I need to make my parents happy." Even though Ajay was bitter about his lacking family

support for his studies, he also stated that his family's happiness was more important to him than his studies. Considering the obligations to education and family and their dual value in students' lives, it is necessary to observe how students navigate these tensions not simply at the onset but throughout 10+2 schooling.

### **Benefits of Schooling for Family**

Beginning 10+2 schooling in a new environment meant adjusting to different routines, whether in Kathmandu or Sidhi. The way that students reflected on some of the benefits of these changes recalls the importance placed on education as a way for social and economic mobility for themselves and their families. Since every student interviewed attended a rural, government, Nepali-medium instructional schools before 10+2, the change to English medium for Kathmandu students was especially challenging. Despite these initial struggles, almost all city-school students reported that they gained more English skills over time and recognized its long-term benefits. Roji recounted how her family felt when she first started 10+2 law school in Kathmandu.

My family had felt happy because I studied at a simple government school in the village and then for [Class] 11, which is to say at Aakash College (pseudonym), it was a private school, and you have to study all in English medium and therefore I can improve my own English and doing that my parents are happy.

Roji not only highlights the individual benefits of studying English medium but also how it gave her family pride in her accomplishments. Her discourse here aligns with how private schools, although more expensive, oftentimes offer a greater sense of status by offering English medium instruction (Pherali et al., 2011). Even with the challenges that accompanied learning in their second or third language, students were proud of their results.

The practicality of learning English was also emphasized in how students recognized it as the ultimate "international language." Miyansha (19 years old, female), who studied business



management at a school in Kathmandu had a choice in the medium of instruction and chose English for the following reasoning:

Uh, well they all were able to be arranged from Nepali medium, no? But I said OK now from English, it is the international language, no? And due to that I felt why do I need to study in Nepali medium, from the beginning I studied in Nepali, now I will study from English, so I had chosen to study from English [medium].

Acquiring English as a form of global currency has been a common thread throughout Nepal's education policy even during its periods of political upheaval from the 1970s onward (Pradhan, 2020). For decades, English-medium instruction has been associated with better quality schooling and access to social capital, which has contributed to the socialization of education in Nepal (Liechty, 2003). This is also an indication of the globalization of education as to how English skills are idealized (Carnoy, 1999), as well as how students may anticipate their steps after 10+2 schooling taking them out of the country where English skills may be necessary. These pathways will be expanded upon further in Chapter 7.

Students also brought up the fact that acquiring a wider breadth of knowledge was yet another benefit of going to 10+2 schooling in the city. Gayatri (19 years old, female) noted that she was able to, "learn new things studying in college, get to know about the really new places, and whatever things you had never seen, whatever things you had never known, that knowledge was available so due to that I was very happy." Acquiring new forms of knowledge indicates how students view their education as a form of upward mobility, as they did not find these opportunities possible in their village community. This is reflected in the literature documenting the pathways of rural to urban migrants in Nepal, as migration for access to greater opportunity through studies and overall resources are motivating factors for migration (Basnet et al., 2021b).

Knowledge and opportunities seemed brighter in Kathmandu, which some teachers attributed to the greater extent of facilities. In this context facilities denotes accommodations,

opportunities, services, and infrastructure available in the city. Sagar Sir, the elder brother of a student studying in Kathmandu, explained that students gravitated to Kathmandu because it was a new environment in comparison to the village where they had been their entire life. They would have access to new friends and facilities, as he elaborated (amidst a rooster crowing), “Uh new friends, there are also lots of facilities. Lots of facilities, new friends, and new place, it becomes all new to them, therefore generally they decide to go to study in Kathmandu.” Another teacher echoed these advantages, in addition to the fact that most students would not need to perform housework while living in Kathmandu. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, some students spoke of additional responsibilities to work alongside their studies to afford their education in the city. While ‘facilities’ in Nepal are oftentimes associated with the opportunities provided through private institutions with higher quality education (Kölbel, 2013), contrasting insight from students shows that quality education went beyond the classification of their educational institution or the extent of its facilities.

Discipline, which denotes dedication to academic rigor, was already a draw to certain 10+2 institutions in the admissions process for students and was mentioned again in what students found dissatisfying or complimentary to their schooling experience. Aahana (18 years old, female) criticized teacher and student motivations at her government 10+2 school in Kathmandu. In comparison to what she had experienced in secondary schooling at Namrata, she found people’s dedication to educational excellence at her 10+2 school was lacking.

There...at Nirasa College (pseudonym) there is little discipline, there is no discipline, ma’am. The teachers do not care. Whoever the sir or ma’am is they do not care, and it is open, open (*khulā khulā*) [freedom] more than other colleges, very much so.

And continued to comment on discipline later:

Yeah it was not strict.... but studies were good, they had good studies, the students who did not study were not good.

This suggests that students want to hold their peers and teachers accountable for fostering an educational environment where they can best succeed. Instead of seeking greater freedom from watchful eyes and regulation, Aahana sought an environment that was more conducive to her succeeding in schooling. Miyansha (19 years old, female) also reflected similar ideals as she detailed what her experience was like at Dallas College in Kathmandu:

It was good because there they teach the studies, the teaching methods were good, I will give you one example. If I do not go to school one day, then they will inform my parents, Mummy & Daddy, like that.

Including parents in student accountability schemes and discipline at schools was viewed as an advantage of Miyansha's schooling experience, which further confirms that education holds a weighted value for students that extends beyond their individual desires. Whether it was due to the higher level of discipline as a result of this protocol or the inclusion of her parents in her educational pathway, Miyansha mentioned this as a positive aspect of her transition to 10+2 schooling.

The array of benefits of 10+2 schooling reflects the inherent value of education as they are directed to the family. Learning English, gaining new knowledge, discipline, and access to facilities all show how students found their 10+2 educational pathways would lead them to upward mobility. However, this upward mobility is not individual, but rather collective, as was shown earlier in this chapter. Parents and family units are both the motivators and recipients of benefits students may accrue in their educational pathways.

### **Battling Homesickness**

Despite the myriad benefits to living in the city to pursue education that will ultimately benefit themselves and their families, almost every student who studied in Kathmandu reported feelings of missing home or feeling isolated in the transition. For many of the students

interviewed, moving to Kathmandu meant renting a room with extended family members, their village friends, a family member who migrated with them to the city, or living alone. The beginning period of moving to the city and adjusting to a new living situation was especially difficult for students as it was often their first experience living separately from their family unit. Numerous theories exist for the psychosocial effects of migrating from urban to rural spaces both internally and internationally. A study from China focused on the mental health of migrants from rural to urban spaces and found that physical isolation and psychological loneliness were common in predisposing migrants to mental health problems in the process of migrating. Discrepancies between a migrant's home and new host environment can lead to difficulties in adjustment, including feelings of lower self-confidence and autonomy (Li et al., 2006). Even though these students were valuing their education and family through migration, uprooting from their home communities was still a difficult journey. To achieve the full value of education, many students in this study had to endure the immediate hardships of being away from home.

Students' feelings of homesickness or isolation did, of course, depend to some extent on their family situation. Prajit from Chapter 4, for instance, did not miss his home situation which had been made chaotic by his father's drinking problem. However, most students missed their life in the village and the feeling of being with family at some point in the transition to 10+2 schooling in Kathmandu.

For students living with family members in the city, missing home indicated that the composition of the village experience was difficult to emulate. Ajay, an 18-year-old male student studying law, commented that although he lived with his father in a rented room in Kathmandu it felt as if he lived alone. Ajay missed his family in the village dearly, as he found the city's urban and social environment to be extremely different from that in the village.

Here is not like the village. In the village we would play, we would do things there, you knew everyone, it would be fun. Now it is not like the village. Now I am feeling alone, I do not know many people, no friends, all of my school friends are all living far away, separately (*sabai janā chuṭai chuṭai cōllēgē mā saṅgai paḍhēkō sāthīharu sabai janā chuṭai chuṭai*).

Similar experiences have been documented by Jennifer Morton (2019) in the context of first-generation college students in the United States, who experience ethical strains between leaving for college and remaining embedded with their home communities. She has argued the disparities between school and students' home communities can be largely felt as the inability to replicate or replace their unique relationships with home (Morton, 2019). This has also been highlighted by the study in China on rural to urban migration and the difficulties that unfold in changing environments (Li et al., 2006). Even with the presence of a familiar figure, Ajay's living situation with his father was still very different from the village. Living in Kathmandu, Ajay took on the responsibilities to make food, working a job at a carpet factory, and dedicating time to his schoolwork with the expectation to perform well and get high marks. He also had no village friends nearby in Kathmandu, which could have contributed to his feelings of isolation even while living with his father. Ajay missed his family a lot and did not hold back in sharing the difficulties of being homesick.

Lacking friends was part of the challenge in Kathmandu for Gayatri (19 years old, female), who lived with her sister:

At that time, I missed my home and my mother, father and my school friends, and the village. I missed it a lot, and Kathmandu was a new place, and I had not met any friends. My new friends did not speak with me, I did not have any friends and at the college break, tiffin [lunch] time going outside I sat alone. How much I missed my village friends and my mother and father and how much I felt that myself, I missed them very much.

Gayatri missed both her family and social circle of friends from the village dearly and struggled to make friends during her transition to the city. Even students who had easier access to their

village friends in Kathmandu went through periods where they missed their family and the village. Aahana and Shanti (18 and 19 years old respectively) were close female friends, lived with one another in Kathmandu, and attended the same government 10+2 school. However, Shanti commented that she still had difficulty making new friends. Although she had her old village friends very close by, she struggled to talk with new classmates and teachers. It was challenging for her to live away from her family as she commented "...it was the first time living far from them, so I missed them." The presence of other village students mirrored village life and a sense of familiarity but perhaps was not enough to buffer the transition to living away from their families. This also suggests that truly living alone (as opposed to feeling alone due to the dynamics and environment being different from that of the village) has especially reverberating effects due to feelings of being truly isolated. Two students who were living alone at some point during their transition to the city mentioned feeling very separate from their family and their friends. For these students especially, making phone calls home was a crucial form of support.

Frequent calls home, whether daily or weekly, were a common strategy used by most students for coping with missing family and friends. The passage of time and peer support also alleviated the effects of feeling alone and homesickness for students. Roji (18-years old, female) lived alone for the first year of 10+2 and would call home three to four times a day. Although things got better for Roji after about six months, it was still challenging for her to be alone.

(Laughs) [I missed] my mother, in the beginning while studying in the room I was there all alone and at that time my little brother was not there, my father was also not there, so at first I thought where do I go? I missed my family soooo much, I did not know anyone, it felt very difficult for me. I was living so separate from my family and at that time I felt so young, I did not feel grown up, I wanted to return home. I wanted to return [home], I did not want to study, but then this passed and it got better.

Roji, as well as several other students, mentioned that despite battling the difficulties of loneliness, they grew accustomed to living in the city without their family and village friends, or slowly began creating new friendships. However, these new friendships remained different from their home communities, as described by Roji:

Hmm how do I say it. All of a sudden, well there my friends and my Plus 2 friends were quite different, but even with this my friends were very friendly, we spoke together well, they helped me, they helped teach me and therefore they also helped me with everything, they helped me very much, my friends here are great. Nonetheless, I have a good relationship with my friends. (Laughs)

Other students also mentioned how new friendships helped their transitions into 10+2 schooling. However, in Roji's case, she felt so homesick that at times she felt like she even wanted to quit her studies. Daily phone calls home helped, but they were by no means a replacement, similar to how her new friends were still different from her village friendships. Even though students understood their dedication to their education was for their family, being away from home and their unique relationships appeared to be perhaps the most challenging aspect of students' upwardly mobile pathways.

This emphasis on missing home while studying in Kathmandu was, interestingly, not reflected in sentiments from Anish Sir, a Namrata Secondary School teacher. Instead, Anish Sir thought that students pursuing schooling in the city did not have any difficulties, as they were able to afford their education. When I asked him if students' families missed them while they were studying away from home, he mused that they would not have any problems, as they would be able to call home and talk on the phone. He elaborated further on how students studying in Kathmandu encountered limited difficulties because they were able to return home often.

Uh they do not have anything, no problems because in Kathmandu they stay with their friends in a room, and they are able to spend time with friends.... Uh it is like this miss, at that time sometimes they come home, they come home, and then they go.

This teacher's thoughts did align with reflections from students that the presence of peers seemed to have a beneficial, buffering effect. Bhawana (19 years old, female) lived with two other village friends in Kathmandu and noted, "Living far from home, I do not feel anything. Until now I do not feel anything because my friends, Aahana are here. (inaudible)... we laugh and it is fun.... And I do not feel worried (*Ani cintā cāhī lāgēna*)." Although Anish Sir's thoughts align with some students' positive reflections of moving to the city with their friends, he did not consider the experiences of students who may not be living with their friends in a room in Kathmandu. Even those students living with their peers experienced hardship in the transition to 10+2 schooling. Anish Sir's assessment of students' experiences is idealized, as he indicated that calling home and traveling back home are ways it is manageable, and almost a privilege, to study away in Kathmandu. Students relayed that they were able to travel home during long holidays, but frequently traveling home of their own volition was not mentioned during student interviews. This indicates that the struggles students face in living away from their families when they move for 10+2 schooling may not be fully understood or reconciled even by those in the village community. While I had limited contact with family members of students, the absence of students from the household was voiced as a hardship for families.

From the perspective of Shanti's (19 years old, female) family, even with the ability for her to call home, it was difficult to fill her absence. Sagar Sir, Shanti's older brother, said that it was difficult for his family when his little sister went away to study 10+2 in the city. The reality of being able to easily travel home was dismissed in his description as follows:

While she was not at home, we felt lonely without her, we felt a little sad. But she also went to study and due to that our hearts are happy, it was good for her to go and study we thought like that.... Yeah, and having not lived far away [from home], while living far away it was a little scary [for her], what will living be like, what will go wrong then she would feel scared, because it is very far from here to Kathmandu. You also cannot meet daily, monthly, if they [the 10+2 students] did come this last year then you can just meet



for a visit, it was also difficult to come and meet, and so she felt a little scared to live away from here. She realized she would have to live in a faraway place, so.....sometimes the expenses would be lacking, and so for sending money from here there is also no direct road from here, so sending money was also difficult. All these things were difficult, but what to do, it is like this in the village, miss.

Sagar Sir acknowledged that his sister was apprehensive to leave the village area and that their family unit also felt her absence. However, the far distance to migrate to the city warranted her a better education and ability to dedicate herself to her studies, as Sagar Sir references that his family was extremely happy and proud of these pursuits. Here, Sagar Sir also notes that traveling home and other logistics of sending funds to the city may have posed large barriers for students and their families. However, the difficulties of isolation and homesickness were justified through the value of studying and obtaining an education.

### **Support From Family, Even While Away**

Students routinely identified their family as their greatest sources of support throughout 10+2 schooling. Roji (19 years old, female) summed this up with her thoughts on what she thought helped 10+2 students the most in general.

Oh, for me studying Plus 2, now, how to say it, now it is like this. For each type of home, now you need support from your own home and family and thereafter for your study you need good time, and thereafter, uh that is it. First if your family is supportive then you would be able to do very well, that is how I feel.

Roji had an especially close relationship with her mother. Defying traditional gender norms in Nepali society, her mother did most of the work at home and taught Roji about farm and housework. Roji expanded fondly on her relationship with her mother and noted that she encouraged her in school and helped shoulder her home responsibilities while she was away studying. Preeti (19 years old, female) found her family supported her through her 10+2 schooling at Sidhi by helping prepare her food for her. Since she had a long commute to and from school, this helped ease her daily routine: “While studying at Sidhi my family always gets

my lunch ready. They would always make things ready and anything I say [ask for] they will give, so like that they support me.” Even while living at home, Preeti noted that support from her family helped her remain committed to her studies.

Students who lived in Kathmandu noted that making and cooking food while living alone was particularly difficult. Although students were used to doing such tasks in the village, perhaps the absence of family to share food or cooking tasks with, or the added costs of purchasing food to cook (as opposed to eating the food grown in their fields) made it more burdensome. Kaya (19 years old, male) detailed this support from his family:

**Kaya:** Yes, while studying in Plus 2, it was not only money, because in Kathmandu you have to buy everything, no? (Switching to English) We should all of buy. (Speaking in Nepali) And in the village, there would be all of those things, like vegetables, other things and other things and they are supplying [these things] to me.

**Grace:** Ay yeah like from the village?

**Kaya:** Yeah from the village and they are supplying to me. Many things. Like, vegetables and also...

**Grace:** Fruits?

**Kaya:** Yeah fruits, well those are not available (in English) because there is no product, no any fruits..

**Grace:** Ay yeah (laughs) in the village.

**Kaya:** (In Nepali) Yeah and that is it, they would give me the things from the village and so here I would not need to buy the things in Kathmandu, after sending it from the village.

**Grace:** Yeah, how great. So, it was fresh, fresh, fresh.

**Kaya:** (In Nepali) Yes, now if they did not send it from the village, then you would need to buy it in Kathmandu. To buy things you need money, again in Kathmandu, and it is so expensive in the shops. Due to that [they sent me with food].

As Kaya’s comment demonstrates, even when families may have not been able to monetarily support their children, they still supported their children’s journeys through 10+2 with other resources.

Students also identified direct monetary support from their families as supportive of their educational pathways. Aahana’s (18 years old, female) mother had been working abroad and

sending money back to their family for more than a decade and expressed that her family supported her monetarily whenever she needed it.

**Aahana:** All of the things I needed my house gave. Like.... whatever I personally needed...everything.

**Grace:** Did you also feel support from the village?

**Aahana:** Yeah. And while studying in Class 11 and 12 I could not do any sort of job, there are expenses for everything, so they supported everything.

Aahana's support from her family allowed her the ability to focus solely on her studies, and not have to work while studying. This was seen as a large source of support, as working while studying could be distracting and difficult for students.

Students acknowledged their families' suffering as a source of support for them. Kumar's parents had to take out a loan at some point during his pursuit of engineering school, and he detailed, "Regardless if we spend the money, no matter how sad Mom and Dad are, no matter what happens, I finished Plus 2 and so they are happy." Despite students' financial troubles, some felt support from their families and understood that their families made sacrifices to support their educational pursuits. While this could be assumed from the overall emphasis on the value of education, it is noteworthy that students felt support from their families not simply at the onset of their enrollment. Altogether, most 10+2 students noted direct or indirect forms of support from their families throughout their pursuits of 10+2 schooling. Another form of support that, theoretically, should have been available to students was from their 10+2 schools and teachers. However, there were discrepancies in the support secondary and 10+2 teachers highlighted in comparison to what students reported.

Two of the secondary school teachers from Namrata and a 10+2 teacher from Sidhi School emphasized the important role of teachers to motivate students and to serve as advocates when students' families did not value education or experienced hardships. On the contrary, only

one student identified feeling guidance from her 10+2 teachers. Other students explicitly stated that they felt no support from their 10+2 teachers. Kaya (19 years old, male) muttered the following about teacher support:

Kaya: Uhhh, support, there was no support, what support, what kind of support.....

Grace: Mm like did you feel support from your teachers?

Kaya: No.

Grace: No? Oh. They-

Kaya: The teachers would come to class, they would teach, and then they would leave.

Just that.

Grace: Mm, so you were not close with them?

Kaya: I was not.

Ajay (18 years old, male) echoed this dissatisfaction with teacher support as he described “I am not receiving any significant help, I have not gotten to know them properly.” Ajay went on to note that he did not receive support from his secondary teachers when he returned home to the village either. This lack of support as students entered a new environment at 10+2 is problematic because a lack of social capital and social connections has been highlighted as disadvantaging many Nepali students from upward mobility. Without personal relationships with teachers, students may be deprived of opportunities for after higher secondary schooling. Teachers did seem to understand the role they played to influence students on an individual level, yet there were discrepancies in what happened in practice as relayed by students. Lack of support from teachers restricts the extent that students can value their education, as instead they must rely more heavily on support from their home community and may still be deprived of social capital.

In this chapter I have shown how students value their family through their 10+2 pathways. Students’ responsibilities shift as their higher secondary schooling education incurs greater levels of sacrifice for their family unit, but they retain that the benefits of their educational journeys will return to their family units. Feelings of homesickness also underscore the unique social relationships students have with their home communities and indicate that they

still rely on their family for support even while away. Unfortunately, there are limited alternatives of support for students from teachers, and even more barriers posed by their economic situations. Students struggle to realize the true value of their education as benefitting their families as economic strains threaten their education. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated these hardships for students and will be explored in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 6: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Deepson Sir:** (in English) When COVID-19 is spreading all our rural area, rural municipality, we closed our school and all of school of our area were closed, not just our area all area were closed because of not accessibility of internet for online classes, after that all of the students stay their home by doing household work and helping their parents in their work, their agriculture work, and they are learning different activities with their parent, they are learning, they were learning informal education. Informal knowledge. Getting informal education from their community, from their society, from their parents, different skills, they learned different skills.

**Grace:** Like-like farming skills?

**Deepson Sir:** Yeah, like farming skills. And parents' response is that, parent's responsibility is that both positive and negative also. Parents has response positively and negatively also. This COVID-19 time, positive response is that, it is an opportunity for them to teach all the household work. That was the time to teach the household work, and make their children very responsible, friendly, and they can spend good times in the family, that was the positive thing. And they could not get good family, they could get good family time, that is a positive aspect. And the negative aspect is that children lost their formal education, they could not go to school and they thought that, education system is stopped. They felt fear, frightened.

Both positive and negative aspects of the pandemic emerged from student discourse surrounding their living situations changing during school closures and intermittent lockdowns. Although students' commitments to family are realized through the pursuit of 10+2 schooling, the associated economic pressures also lead to challenges for students. These economic pressures arguably became exacerbated as the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted school across the country. Students found their home and school responsibilities came into conflict more during the pandemic as they moved home to continue their schooling but on the whole, their biggest concern was the reduced quality and access to schooling. The COVID-19 pandemic caused large-scale learning losses resulting from self-instruction, balancing responsibilities at home, difficulty to take online classes and the return to in-person distanced learning. However, students also found themselves in positions closer to home, and many experienced relief at being back with family.

## **COVID-19 Disruptions & Drawbacks**

### *Timeline of School Closures*

The effects of school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a shift in education technology for distance learning that varied globally; however, no country had systems in place that were fully prepared for the sudden changes at the onset of the pandemic (Azzi-Huck & Shmis, 2020). In March 2020, schools in Nepal were closed for five months until July 2020 (The World Bank Group, 2022). During this time, schools that had the resources offered online classes. Those that did not were closed until November 2020 or longer, as this was when the Ministry of Education gave jurisdiction for school re-openings to the local level (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). The Government of Nepal, under the assistance of UNICEF Nepal, issued the Learning Continuity Campaign (LCC) in January 2021, which had resources for students, parents, and teachers to access from a myriad of different environments, including radio learning (UNICEF Nepal, 2021). During the brief window where schools opened nationally with proper COVID-19 precautions taken, most of the students interviewed relayed that this meant wearing masks, remaining physically distant from teachers, and using hand sanitizer often. However, schools closed once more with the Delta variant surge in the summer of 2021. As schools began re-opening, nationwide shutdowns occurred again for several weeks in January 2022 to mitigate the spread of the Omicron variant (Sharma, 2022). The intermittent lockdowns and subsequent school closures were confusing track since every student's educational pathway and living situation differed. A common thread across students' experiences was that their families' already fragile financial foundations were negatively impacted.

### *Changes to Village Life*

Outside of the direct impacts on students' education, shutdowns on a global scale and increasing infections changed day-to-day life even in the village. As the pandemic and variant waves continued to unfold it was a stressful, scary, and very different time in the village. Preeti's (19 years old, female) father stated that the major drawbacks of the pandemic were the global-scale impact of suffering and the loss of time from being in lockdown.

Corona has done so many things, miss. There was no school.... because of corona the world has been betrayed, the world has suffered..... We were not able to go out because the whole world would get the disease, we have lost time, it has caused such great disaster.

The idea of lost time applied to students' studies and the trajectory of people's lives when lockdowns restricted opportunities to work (particularly in Kathmandu) or limited opportunities to farm collaboratively or freely. Restrictions in the village were much less stringent and did not bar people completely from farming, however, they did affect their interactions with others in the village and community farming tasks. Maintaining relationships in the village was much more restricted during the pandemic times, as students were only allowed to meet up with nearby friends and family. Bhawana (19 years old, female) mentioned that "my heart was sad, it was not enjoyable (*man dukhyō, naramā'ilō*)" that she could not go outside very much. Not only was physical mobility within the village restricted due to the pandemic, but the flow of goods also halted at times due to government lockdowns.

Preeti (19 years old, female) elaborated further on how her family's farming livelihood was not resilient to the economic challenges brought on by the pandemic.

In the village, we worked and need to eat, right? And there was no work, and because there was no work we would sit, sit (not working) eating, beating the rice, and for food you had to buy things and cooking oil and other things and at that time there was no money.



The economic repercussions that resulted from national shutdowns and social distancing not only affected daily farming tasks but family members' employment and salary contributions as well. Shanti (19 years old, female) mentioned that her brother, Sagar Sir, a teacher at Namrata School, was not able to work during the school closures so there was no "money-making" person at home. For some students, the pandemic further entrenched them in financial difficulties, and they had to take out loans. Kumar (20 years old, male) bemoaned the fact that he and both his parents were unable to work during the pandemic, and only recently that his older sister got a teaching job in the village to make money for the family. Even though he was not using his rented room in Kathmandu during the school closures, "We had to pay 120,000 or 110,000 NPR (equivalent to around USD 1000) for the room rent. We were not staying in the room, and Daddy took on a loan to pay." For Kumar, the financial impact was one of the worst consequences of the pandemic, alongside detrimental effects on his studies.

### **Large Scale Learning Losses**

#### *Self-Instruction*

Sidhi School students were largely disadvantaged by not having any online schooling options available to them. Reflecting on the fluctuations of school closures, Pemba (19 years old, male) described: "We did not have full online class study, we don't have online class and uh I have net (network) and as much as I could, I would use the net to continue to watch videos, and I would try and learn from watching the YouTube videos (laughs)." Many students were forced to rely on self-instruction during the time that schools were closed, which would seemingly place a lot of pressure on students to be self-motivated and independently understand the content. These experiences have been captured in early studies in Kenya and Nepal, where longer school

closures correlated with lower motivation for female students to learn (Tetra Tech International Development, 2022).

On top of the delays in transitioning from Class 10 to Class 11 due to the pandemic, Pemba began Class 11 several months after it had already started. It was difficult to decipher what the root cause of this added delay was, but its impacts on his education were quite obvious: “I lost a lot of my schooling, at that time there it had started already three or four months had passed but at that time I did not go (in English) so I was lost.” The full extent of learning loss varied across the country, but the same study also evaluated learning loss in Nepal and found that girls’ reading and math scores fell by 0.89 and 0.73 standard deviations, respectively (Tetra Tech, 2022). Since exam scores play a large role in determining students' advancement into higher education, the impacts of learning loss are devastating across many aspects of students' lives.

Even with the Government of Nepal providing alternative forms of learning through radio, television, and self-instructional materials, I did not hear reports of any of these modalities in interviews. The most common form of remote instruction in Nepal during the pandemic was using school textbooks for self-instruction (Tetra Tech, 2022). Reports on the effects of the pandemic have shown that although mobile phones are the most common form of technology across Nepal, only around 50% of households have a device that can access the internet (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). In more rural areas, there were disadvantages posed by the lack of consistent and affordable internet connection as well. These issues of inequitable access to continued learning during the pandemic exist even in what are considered high-income countries, as in the United States 12% of homes are not connected to the internet. Poorer students in high-income nations are less likely to be able to access online learning, indicating that online

schooling has been a large driver of inequity in learning globally, with even severer divides based on gender and disability (Carvalho & Hares, 2020). Even though the Kathmandu students had more options for online schooling, and many had their own devices, they too reflected frustration with the diminishing quality of education they received through online schooling.

### *Juggling Responsibilities & Online Schooling*

Students did not mention tensions in balancing their home and school responsibilities in the context of 10+2 schooling until the subject of the COVID-19 pandemic came up. It seemed that the pandemic created a tipping point of new conditions that did indeed, at least in some cases, produce the tensions between home and school responsibilities that I had initially expected to see in my study. The unique challenge of balancing work and school responsibilities at home was highlighted by several students. Adding unreliable Internet connectivity on top of taking online classes from home, Nisha (19 years old, female) explained that she did not tune into classes at all. “If I went to work in the morning then there would be no study [network] available in the afternoon, if I went to work in the afternoon then there would be no study [network] available in the morning.” Frustrations with unreliable Internet connections combined with commitments to household tasks illustrate how the value of education and immediate commitments to home and family can come into conflict, as I had originally anticipated. Another student, Bhawana (19 years old, female) noted that because she had farm work to do and unreliable service in the village, she only ended up going to a few weeks of online class. Students did not report difficulties stemming from their work obligations as much as the detrimental effects to their education that their unreliable Internet connections created when they were home during the pandemic. Harshika (19 years old, female) summed this up by saying:

There would sometimes be house responsibilities, work during the important times, sometimes you had to go to the festivals/functions (*mēlā*) those times you would leave

[from school], but another thing is that more than the home responsibilities would be the net problems. Sometimes the electricity would not come, and when the electricity would not come then your phone would not charge, your phone would be off, and the net would not work, and that was the problem, the net, for our studies.

Many students recalled having to sit outside searching for service, or taking classes from the roof of their homes, in the middle of rainy weather events at times. Ironically, I was interrupted by these network issues while in the middle of my interview with Kaya (19 years old, male), who had connection problems even when talking with me from his rented room in Kathmandu.

Kaya: Online, yes. There would be online class operating, there was a little from the college apparently. (In English) Uh, but we are not attend because like of the network – [call drops]

Grace: Ay hello?

Kaya: Uh there was a network lag and in the village it is like this, there is a network lag and we cannot attend online class, (in English) sorry, [I mean] I cannot attend.

If the spotty network in Kathmandu was any indication of the connection issues facing students, it made sense why students were unable to connect to any online schooling from the village.

Another student agreed that the worst effect of the pandemic was how their studies suffered because of poor network connection while living back in the village. Kumar (20 years old, male) explained this as follows:

For me what has been the biggest suffering was my studies when they were online the network would go (be unstable) and it was very difficult to understand what was going on in class, and I had to teach myself, and because of that my studies have gotten very weak and that has been so difficult. Very much so.

Among the many challenges of the pandemic, Kumar named the detrimental impact on his education as the most serious of them. Even though every student encountered different experiences with online schooling capabilities, it is evident that better Internet connectivity could have mitigated some of that damage. This is true even for students who did not have online classes, as many relied on self-instruction using YouTube, and should be considered in the broader spectrum of the digital divide globally.

Lack of communication about school shifts to online learning was another challenge several students faced. Another case study in Nepal identified this gap in communication about learning resources, especially in rural areas (Tetra Tech., 2022). For Prajit (19 years old, male), who went home and herded his family's goats to pass the time during school closures, he found out later that his 10+2 college had begun online courses without notifying him. He details the overall impact of this miscommunication on his studies below:

**Prajit:** (in English) Yeah, so.... I am in college. Course is completely fast (motions with hand sweeping across the video screen) at that time, I do not have any mobile, so I think, I think that's the problem. (in Nepali) That time, after going back to college, I found the course had already been completed. Therefore, we, after one month, for the exam 11, board exam. (in English) But I don't know anything, how to study.

**Grace:** Wah, oh my gosh.

**Prajit:** So, I will study to look YouTube... With, yes, *Gurubaa*, *Gurubaa* channel we have. *Gurubaa* YouTube, there, there teach all subject for 11, 12.

**Grace:** Wow.

**Prajit:** So, at that time, *Gurubaa* channel is very helpful for me. So, so for exam prepare I had slowly slowly make up my study. And also write exam for best.... We already pass 11.

**Grace:** Yeah I'm uh, (clucks) no one from Aakash College told you there was online class? Like you did not know that they had put the classes online, nobody notified you?

**Prajit:** Yes ma'am I don't want, I do not have information.

**Grace:** Yeah, that is awful.

**Prajit:** Uh, I think at that time I do not have any mobile instrument or in village you know, no any internet so direct problem for study, online.

**Grace:** Oh yeah. Ohh so you never took online class in the village?

**Prajit:** I did not study (in English). No. No any classes for online.

Prajit's inability to engage with online learning was particularly devastating because his family situation was not the most conducive space to learning independently. Prajit also shared that he felt he lost his career and time due to COVID-19, going so far to say, "I was ruined (*Barbād bhayō*)." The long-term impacts on students' abilities to perform well on their exams or learn the full content was also internalized and contributed to mental anguish. When considering the pressure to complete schooling on time and at a chronological age in the formal schooling system

(Valentin, 2011), it is no surprise that students who were “falling behind” in schooling, or otherwise experiencing learning losses caused by the pandemic, felt heightened tensions. The mental impacts provide further evidence of the extreme importance students placed on their education for their families, as they found that translating their education into work would be much more difficult.

### *Learning Losses through Pandemic Schooling*

When schools moved back to in-person instruction, there were a different array of challenges that students faced that inhibited their educational pathways. When Sidhi Higher Secondary School reopened, Preeti (19 years old, female) was critical of its lower standards and the constraints in building close relationships with teachers and students. She described the following:

After the COVID pandemic came.... you could not be friendly with the sirs (teachers). We had to be far far away and whatever you learn through close contact you could not learn, you had to be very very far away..... And I could not be close/intimate with friends, and the standard of education I got went down, I did not get the full content (*Ani sāthīharu saṅga pani tyētibēlā ghul mil hunu pā'ēna ani paḍhā'i ēkadamai lose bhayō tyētikai tighṭ pani bha'ēna*).

On top of the direct impacts to Preeti's quality of education, her already difficult commute to Sidhi was made even more challenging with limited socialization.

After COVID-19 came I had to go to Sidhi from here alone on the road that took an hour to walk, and I could not sit with my friends, I was alone. And at the time of studying, we would not sit well and close with the teacher to ask questions. And then we could not be friendly with the teachers.

These impacts on the quality of education and students' socialization opportunities were especially severe for those students beginning Class 11, as they had little in the form of friend or teacher relationships to reconnect with. Forging these relationships during pandemic times was challenging, especially considering the level of homesickness that students experience while

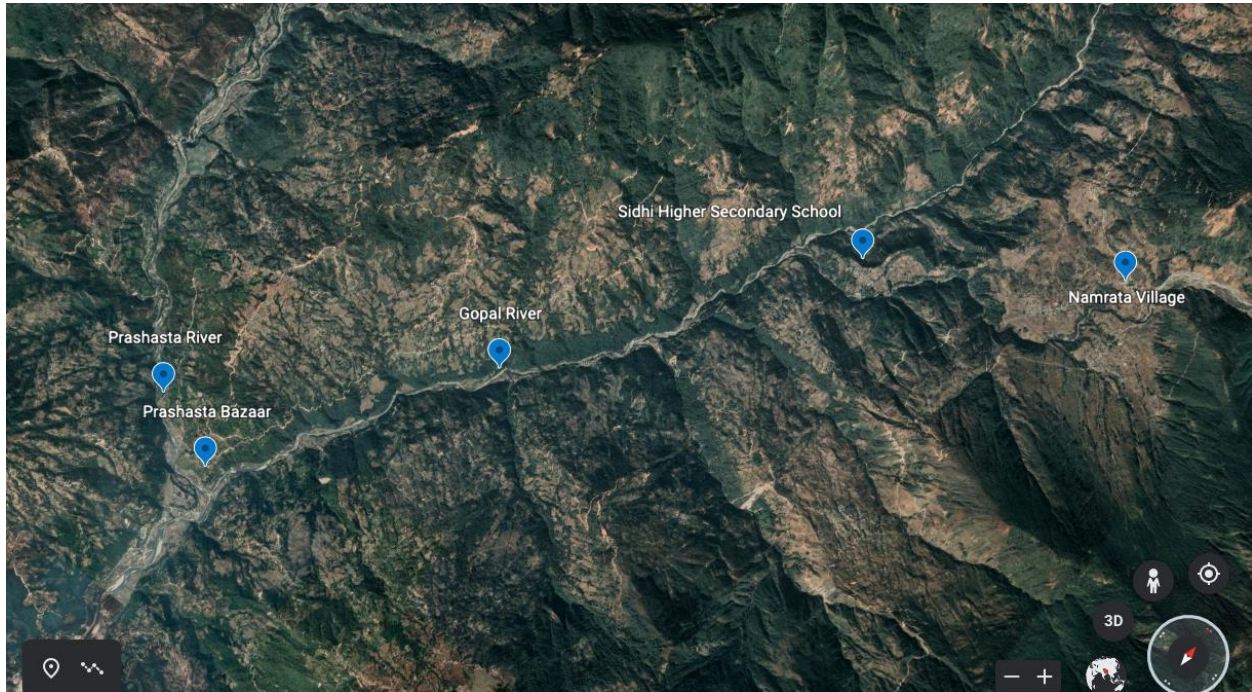
studying away from home for 10+2 schooling. Hence, the reliance on connections back home would be perceived to be even more pronounced because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In many respects, students felt that their 10+2 education (and pathway to benefit their families) was ruined because of the pandemic.

### *Learning Losses Due to Flooding*

With these weighted educational pathways and the already intense effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the financial health of families, students' troubles only became exacerbated by a nearby extreme weather event. On June 15th, 2021, a devastating series of flash floods hit Prashasta Bazaar, a larger township about 20 kilometers south of Namrata village. The Gopal and Prashasta tributaries received heavy rainfall at the onset of the monsoon season which, coupled with old and new landslides and debris and climatic factors (Maharjan et al., 2021), led to intense flooding and loss of life and property along the Prashasta River (see Figure 6.1). One hundred homes were swept away in the flooding, and more than four hundred households were forced to relocate ("The Monsoon Mess", 2021). Although the flooding did not directly affect Namrata village and the surrounding communities (aside from landslides) where the students lived, there were many ancillary effects of the flooding that impacted students' livelihoods.

**Figure 6. 1**

*Map of the Gopal and Prashasta Tributaries and the Site of the Flooding in Prashasta in Relation to the Study Site*



Created using Google Earth.

Sidhi School was still under COVID lockdown during the Prashasta flooding event. Although the flooding did not affect the continuation of schooling for students at Sidhi, the destroyed roads intensified isolation and economic hardship for people in the village. After infrastructure was destroyed in the 2015 earthquake, it was especially devastating to have six newly repaired road bridges, twelve pedestrian suspension bridges, and numerous homes destroyed in the flooding (“The Monsoon Mess”, 2021). Preeti (19 years old) described how inflation resulted from the restricted movement of goods to the village area: “Prices increased, there was also no work (laughs), there was no money, everything increased in price.” Although Preeti made light of the situation, she had detailed previously that her family’s farming and



financial situation was very fragile due to the pandemic. Economic strains caused by the flooding would then have especially detrimental effects on families already suffering because of the pandemic.

The hazardous road also made personal transport to Kathmandu extremely difficult and treacherous. For Miyansha (19 years old, female), this directly impacted her studies because she needed to travel to the city to take her Class 12 board exams. The impassable roads from the flooding made the already difficult journey to the city for exams even more time-consuming and stressful. As students' physical mobility became even more restricted, they also encountered even more limited online learning alternatives due to electricity shortages. Kumar (20 years old, male) outlined these difficulties below:

Kumar: Yes, yes due to the flooding it was very difficult to take online classes. At that time, it was 5,6,7 days that I could not take online class, there was no network, there was no charge on my mobile, for online class you need a mobile and there was no place to charge, so it was 5,6,7 perhaps 13 days total that I did not take online class, it was very difficult while taking exams (laughs).

Grace: Yeah, thirteen days? That's so much...and at that time there was a long gap?

Kumar: Yes, the courses online would be taught so quickly by the teachers, where had they reached [in the book], when I first joined we were at Unit 2, and then I had dropped out (could not attend) and then at the time I joined we were at Unit 3, and where had we already reached then, it was very difficult at that time to manage.

The flood caused students to feel even further behind and stressed, as they had to study by self-instruction and their peers' notes. The loss of electricity and network connection for an extended period also negatively affected 10+2 students living in Kathmandu at the time.

Ajay (18 years old, male) was studying and working in Kathmandu at the time of the Prashasta flooding. He shared how he was impacted by the flooding from afar:

At that time my family's phone was switched off, I could not talk with them, and it was like what happened, what happened. I am here, they are there. I also cannot go, there was no road, oh what a big problem.

Restricted communication with family affected students mentally and, although not stated explicitly, these interruptions of communication and to education would most likely reverberate back to their families, as students' successes in schooling are expected to cycle back to the family. The compounding effects of this flooding event underscore the importance of developing resilience to natural disasters in Nepal's education and social systems. Although disaster prevention and resilience are part of Nepal's Sustainable Development Goals (NPC, 2020), the secondary effects on students' education should also be incorporated into policy efforts. Many devastating effects of the pandemic and flooding amounted to students struggling to realize their full potential through schooling, and subsequent dedication to their families. However, there were some silver linings that emerged from the pandemic.

### **Positive Parts**

During past global disease outbreaks, parents and caregivers have been identified as key actors in identifying and supporting children's physical and psychosocial health issues. In certain cases, such as in China, the higher volume of open interactions at home with children can strengthen family bonds (Karki, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In my research, many of the students found it helpful to be at home with their families during the uncertain and frightening times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Harshika (19 years old, female) expressed: "While living with my family I felt happy, no matter what everyone was saying it [COVID] would be fatal and so living with my family, it was better/enjoyable." Finding solace in being with family was not unexpected, considering how embedded students already were in their family and, as elucidated in Chapter 5, since students reported feeling homesick through the transition into 10+2. However, several students voiced another benefit to being at home that surprised me.

Preeti (19 years old, female) explained to me that even though Sidhi School was closed, she was thankful to spend quality time with her family and learn different types of knowledge.

The good parts were living with family and being able to help them. And, having conversations with them, and to share/learn things from them from living together, I could also learn about the farm and field work, that was all good and then the bad parts were that while sitting, sitting at [home] I was bored and I could not study well, and because of COVID I could not travel or explore around, and I could not meet up with my friends, and I felt alone.

The positive points of learning from family and spending quality time together are compelling coming from Preeti because she had already been living with her family while studying at Sidhi. She also expressed opposing bad parts of the pandemic, which I will return to at the end of this section. Several more students who studied in Kathmandu reiterated feeling happy living with their families, and these sentiments were also confirmed by family members and teachers.

Speaking as the brother of Shanti (19 years old, female) who returned from Kathmandu to live at home during the pandemic, Sagar Sir documented what it was like having her back home again.

Ah, at the time that Shanti was home she felt good. She used to help with the work therefore it used to feel easier for me to do the housework, it would be easy, and it was very enjoyable for her to stay at home. And after, after [she] went far away there was no working person at home, and again being far away, again it was hard to call, the difficult road was also a reason for not going home.

Not just the benefits, but also the drawbacks from Shanti's absence indicate that having the family together again was helpful for work responsibilities at home. Even one Namrata teacher admitted that there were benefits for students to be home with their families during this time, but that distractions were involved as well. Anish Sir raised skepticism about the benefits of students being back at home as extra hands for work because it "spoiled" their studies by distracting them. This alludes to the conflicting responsibilities highlighted by students earlier in this chapter; however, students were more troubled by unreliable network negatively impacting their

ability to learn online rather than how their housework distracted them from their studies. Kumar (20 years old, male), who caught COVID-19, voiced his happiness in living at home, but that these benefits were overshadowed by his studies weakening. “Of course, while studying and staying at home I felt happy then, but my studies were affected by everything going on, so I was also very sad.” Students felt happy being back with their families, but this was coupled with the drawbacks of how their studies suffered while studying in the village. This suggests that students’ longer-term obligations to their families through education may be more valuable than the immediate value of living at home with their families. This quandary was described by Sidhi 10+2 teacher Deepson Sir in the epithet of this chapter, as he contrasted the negative impacts on students’ formal schooling with the benefits posed by learning informal knowledge at home. Preeti’s thoughts from earlier also confirm these sentiments, as she expressed feeling bored at home without schooling. This indicates that although there were positive aspects of being at home, students were most concerned with the impacts to their education because this was how they ultimately prioritize family.

I have claimed that students' longer-term obligations to their families are woven into their families' economic landscapes and their educational pursuits, but that these pathways became severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, students encountered more conflict with their household and school responsibilities and realized their pathways ahead were less guaranteed. Compounding students’ struggles were the effects of the Prashasta flooding. While there were positive aspects of students being back home with their families during the pandemic lockdowns, their long-term commitments to their families were disrupted in how difficult it was to continue schooling during the pandemic. In my final findings chapter, I explore the structural

restraints that continue to restrict students in honoring their family values, especially as they limit their post-Plus 2 plans.

## CHAPTER 7: THE REALITIES OF WHAT COMES NEXT

Prajit: (speaking in English) My career...career is important for us, so I want to, only one nowadays I want to earn money. (In Nepali) This, this at this time, ma'am it is money. I started to feel now that money is very important. (In English) So many problems. (Switches back to Nepali) Now after Plus 2, I have not gotten a job. No any job nowadays mm and I want to study for Bachelor's. But, Aakash College said, [10+2 graduation] certificate. You know certificate.

Grace: Yeah, I know the certificate.

Prajit: (in English) For pay to...8 thousand minimum. Maximum. (8,000 NPR)

Grace: What!! You have to pay money for your certificate?

Prajit: Yes, for the certificate.

Grace: Whatttt.

Prajit: (in English) Certificate three thousand (NPR). I had, I had (breathes in deeply, then sighs) for pay, in the beginning I had some past.... (In English) [I had some] past, some money to [be] paid.

Grace: Ayy yeah, yeah. Ohh.

Prajit: Sooo, now I still have not received the certificate.

Thus far I have argued that students reinforce the value of family through their education, albeit experiencing difficulties in this path with the effects of the pandemic and economic constraints. However, there are also structural constraints that further limit students from realizing the benefits of their education that must be addressed to pave better pathways forward for students. Otherwise, students and their families will continue to make sacrifices that will perpetually fall short of their aims and ultimate desires. In this chapter, I first share the hypothetical circumstances that students expressed they would choose to study in. Subsequently, I expand upon the structural barriers that prevent student and family desires from becoming a reality and demonstrate that although the value of family is expressed throughout students' journeys of 10+2, the vehicle through which they express this value changes.

### **Aspirations to Accommodate Family**

When presented with hypothetical scenarios of unrestricted choice, the majority of students preferred to live in the village, or otherwise prioritize their families' needs. Although

these inclinations were projected and not grounded in reality, they indicated the ideal situations that students found would be most supportive of their upper secondary schooling pathways.

Preeti (19 years old, female) and several other students voiced preferences for living at home that seemed to outweigh previous criticisms on the quality of education in the village. “Yes, in Kathmandu you have to stay in a different home, it costs money, by staying in the village you can stay in your own home with your parents. In the village, it costs a small amount of money.” The economic advantages of living in the village were important to Preeti and her family, as her father confirmed the following:

Here [in the village] living together it has been nice, to study in Kathmandu is also good but the expenses are so high, the bus fare, food, housing you all have to pay for, and we do not have a way of earning money, whatever money we have is enough to manage the farming. There is no work, and all of the things cost money, so we cannot do it, so our children said they will stay and study and stayed here in the village to study, miss.

While it is difficult to discern Preeti’s personal preferences from that of her family expectations, this is also illustrative that they are one of the same. Reducing economic costs to the family drove Preeti’s preferences, but for some students reduced costs might not translate into living with their family at home.

Other students spoke of their desires to live with family with certain stipulations that would preserve the quality of their education. Miyansha (19 years old, female) explained that she would need a greater variety of subjects at Sidhi School to live at home for 10+2 schooling. Ironically, she was less than enthused when our interview was interrupted by her parents scurrying back and forth in the video frame.

**Miyansha:** If those good colleges are available in the village and like all those desired subjects for me are available to study, then I would study from or around home. Around there, there are not all of those things I mentioned. Therefore, I studied in Kathmandu.

**Grace:** Yeah, and there in the village if there was a good college then why would you study in the village?

**Miyansha:** Why in the village *-chhth* (clucks and glares at activity going on beside her) ...why I would study in the village is I would be able to study while living with my family. And it would be easy, there at home with Mom and Dad it would be easy. The expenses would lessen.

Besides needing a better-quality education in the village, another condition voiced by students if they were to live at home for 10+2 schooling was better network connections for online schooling. This was in alignment with what students voiced as the biggest form of disappointment during the pandemic, which was the detrimental impacts to their education. This discourse indicates that students value their embeddedness in their family life, but their educational pursuits are still a priority as they result in ultimate commitment and repayments to their family. These aspirations for better access to reliable online learning to both preserve the quality of their schooling and reduce economic burdens emerges alongside historical pressures to achieve a “modern” education that will transfer into economic and social benefits. While in the past this meant pursuing education in Kathmandu, or in more urban areas where there is greater access to “higher quality” English-medium schooling, student responses like Miyansha’s indicate that some students aspire for an education that still retain aspects of their home village life with lower costs to their family unit.

Several students expressed dual preferences that reflected tension in valuing family in the short and long term. Kumar (20 years old, male) first expressed the emotional advantages of studying at home. For Kumar, “... living at home our studying can be better, and when our family is sad, we will not feel tension, because of that I would live at home with my Mom and Dad and study.” Here, Kumar noted the benefit of being more in tune to his family’s feelings and suffering by living at home, unveiling how family struggles can be absorbed into student decisions. However, Kumar later went on to distinguish how this choice would change if his family no longer had financial troubles. He did not believe that his English skills would improve



to the same extent in the village, so, instead, he would prefer to study in Kathmandu. Since English language skills have been viewed as the gateway to acquiring a better-quality education and subsequent employment (Liechty, 2003), Kumar's reflections reveal that he has accepted the fact that there were no prospects for "success" if he pursued schooling in the village, despite his initial desires to live at home and study. This reveals the pressure placed on the outcomes of students' educational pathways, such as gaining lucrative skills, as students' educational decisions are made in their families' best interests.

Pemba (19 years old, male) was also keen to stay at home while studying because living away from his family was less than desirable.

**Pemba:** I have studied while living at home, [in English] so that's a good thing for, and I am happy.

**Grace:** And if you did not have the opportunity to stay at home then how would you feel?

**Pemba:** I would feel OK, but more than that, compared to staying at home I would feel different, and I would also feel a little sad maybe.

**Grace:** A little different? Why, *kina*?

**Pemba:** I don't know, uh, while staying at home and while staying in a different place I would feel separate, like that.

**Grace:** And being around other people is good, it is enjoyable.

**Pemba:** It is enjoyable, but it is not like being at home (laughs).

Pemba's last thought states that nothing could emulate being at home, which is a key point raised in Jennifer Morton's research on students' ethical dilemmas in pursuing higher education in the United States (Morton, 2019). Ethical goods, including connections to home, are impossible to replace because unique relationships are so difficult to replicate. In addition to the struggles to afford schooling, losing ethical goods makes transitions into higher education ever more challenging for students (Morton, 2019). This is reflected in Pemba's discourse, as he notes that separation from his family could not possibly replicate living at home. However, later in our conversation Pemba's preferences shifted. He relayed that his studies would not be as rushed if

he lived in a hostel in the village for 10+2 schooling, alluding to the fact that this would offset conflicting responsibilities at home. While Pemba's parents were rarely home, he had referred to his friend group as a positive aspect of 10+2 schooling. This could be another reason for his fascination of living in a hostel in the village and suggests that unique social relationships outside of the family unit are significant to consider in students' school and living choices.

The assumption that students willingly migrate for their education has been critiqued in studies on rural to urban migration in Peru. Instead, it was found that "young people rarely aspired to migrate for the sake of migration" (Crivello, 2011, p. 22). The expectations of returns through education motivated students through rural to urban migration, which is also apparent here in students' reflections on their desires to live at home given certain conditions that preserve their education. This suggests that students should have greater access to quality and affordable schooling in the villages where they reside so that they are able to prioritize their education, family, and individual desires on these educational pathways.

## **Structural Constraints**

### *Lack of Social Capital*

Lacking social capital has been raised as an issue in scholarship distribution and job acquisition in Nepal, especially as *afnomanchhe* (obligations to one's own kin or social networks) continues to permeate Nepali society. Students stressed that corruption and lack of social capital disadvantaged them from the admissions stage until graduating from 10+2 schooling. Although Miyansha (19 years old, female) initially did not have many critiques about her personal schooling experience, she advocated for the admissions process to be more transparent. Miyansha also criticized the scholarship system for favoring students with social connections and not benefitting those students who truly need or deserve financial support.

Here in Nepal the colleges are just based on power and those you have met before, you know? The students who are not good/dull (*paḍhna nā'unē*) they get the scholarship, they get the discount, they get the chance to study for free, those people who have the connections....And those that cannot afford it they are good students, they want to study but they cannot afford it based on their family's financial situation, so they should get the scholarships.

Miyansha's complaints highlight how a lack of social capital poses a structural barrier for deserving students from achieving higher secondary education. Another student echoed these thoughts that everyone should be treated equally in assessing needs within the 10+2 schooling system. Considering that most of Nepal's government scholarship decisions are now made at the local level, where teachers are oftentimes the key decision-makers, nepotism becomes a magnified issue. While favoritism was not identified as a factor in the two scholarships awarded to participants in my study, both students voiced gratitude for social connections that helped them with the scholarship process. Nisha (19 years old, female) remained critical of the scholarship process for being merit-based and need-based and failing to reach students who fell on the periphery of these qualifications: "They only give scholarship to the very poor people who could not study, and so we have to pay ourselves for Class 12 and Bachelor's. And from Class 11, scholarship is only available to the very poor...to the poor and also those, only to those who get the good marks (A+, A), it's just like this in Nepal." Nisha was unsatisfied with the narrow qualifications for scholarship-receiving students, which suggests that scholarship schemes should include more students who need comprehensive support to continue 10+2 schooling.

Even after finishing 10+2 schooling, the issue of social capital continued to follow students into their pursuits of employment. Nisha shared how she became even more limited in finding a job after completing her degree because of corruption.

**Nisha:** Yes, because there was no scholarship it was very expensive, eventually, somehow, I finished Class 11 & 12. Now for business it would be nice to go to Korea and Japan to study, if I can study there then it would be good. But it costs

money again for business. If I had studied science, it would be better. Business is not good in Nepal. In Nepal, the jobholding businessmen and their families are the only ones who have jobs in business, there are no opportunities for us that study business and who are not rich, it is only available for businessmen and their families. For us there is nothing available.

**Grace:** Yeah-

**Nisha:** Selfish, selfish, they are all selfish.

**Grace:** Ay, because like, they only like to make money?

**Nisha:** Yes, yes. *Hajur, hajur.*

**Grace:** Ay ay ay like corruption means selfish, selfish people?

**Nisha:** Yes, yes. *Hajur, hajur.*

This is a direct reference to the dynamics of *afnomanchhe*, where one's social network determines their success and upward mobility. Ascribed status serves to limit students from realizing the true value of their education as it restricts them from accessing employment. These dynamics are even more oppressive when considering students in more rural areas may not have far reaching social webs that include potential employers. Social capital facilitating upward mobility in education can be traced back to the Rana rule period in Nepal, where only those with strong connections to the Rana regime were allowed an education (Caddell, 2007). While the extent of this exclusion differs now, varying degrees of elitism still exist in Nepal and disadvantage talented students from quality 10+2 schooling and eventual employment in Nepal. Additionally, the commodification of education fosters high expectations for students to gain employment upon finishing schooling. As students become limited by their social capital, their aspirations continue to fall short of reality, which was a finding in a study on rural-to-urban migration for work in Kathmandu (Basnet et al., 2020).

### *"Ke Garne" and Fatalism*

I discovered another more implicit impediment facing students in 10+2 schooling in their responses to hardship and disaster. Students exhibited many forms of resilience as their personal lives and education was affected by the earthquake in 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the

Prashasta flooding. A reoccurring response from students regarding this adversity was a phrase commonly used to express acceptance of life's ebbs and flows. The phrase "*ke garne (kē garnē)*" directly translates to "*what to do?*" but holds a greater meaning of "*such is life.*" There is limited literature on the use of this term in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and education, so it is relevant to note its frequency throughout my research.

Students replied with "*ke garne*" quite often in explaining how they managed the hardships of 10+2 schooling. When I asked Ajay (18 years old, male) what he would change about his 10+2 schooling, he responded, "If I did not have any job and could only study that would be good, but what to do, such is life (*tara kē garnē*), it is not like that." Later, when I inquired about whether he had any interest in joining his 10+2 school's debate team (since he was very involved in Namrata Secondary School's debate team) he relayed, "I had interest, but what to do now (*kē garnu aba*) ...some particular things you have a desire to do, but you still cannot do them." Ajay's use of this phrase regarding extracurriculars, his work, and the impacts on his education all point to how he has accepted these struggles as his reality. Even though he was unhappy with his job at the carpet factory, it was necessary for him to work, which limited his ability to engage in extracurricular activities. To a certain degree, he used "*ke garne*" to coax himself out of his woes.

Scholars have explored the connotations of apathy associated with the term "*ke garne.*" Bista (1991) has written about fatalism captured in the use of this term, and how it permeates social and cultural perspectives in Nepal. He explains that in this context life's outcomes are out of one's control and put in the hands of a greater divine being (Bista, 1991; Morrison et al., 2005). Gayatri (19 years old, female) reflected this mentality when speaking about responsibilities she had during 10+2 schooling. Gayatri relayed, "Yes miss you have to do them,

now there are lots of responsibilities. There is nothing to do about it (*Kēhipani kē garnu*).” Amongst these conversations with students, rationalization for their unfortunate circumstances was that there was nothing that could be done but continue forward. Even Sagar Sir, a teacher at Namrata and the elder brother of Shanti (19 years old, female) noted that challenges and sacrifices were almost to be accepted, as this constituted life in the village. While this aligns with the use of the term as fatalistic, Bista’s critiques of this discourse extend to the underdevelopment in Nepal and exclusion through the caste and social system. I do not believe that students were using the term in justifying taking non-action, but rather employing it more as a coping mechanism.

Contrary to Bista’s writings of accusing Nepali society of its fatalistic perspectives for restricting strategizing and taking action to prevent disasters, fatalistic attitudes were not evident across all research participants. The use of “*ke garne*” was expressed as a form of acceptance and coping through adversity brought on by nature. Preeti (19 years old, female) described the effects of the Prashasta flooding as follows:

After the flooding in Prashasta, around here there were no supplies/goods that came. No matter how much we invest, the destruction came by the way of nature, the damage happened naturally, and humans cannot do anything.

The sense that natural disasters happen and there is nothing to be done about it could have been carried over from the devastation of the 2015 earthquake. Besides the physical destruction caused by the earthquake, many villagers were killed or injured in its wake and the series of aftershocks.<sup>14</sup> This period of trauma and destruction could have elicited the use of this phrase as a mentality to continue through adversity. One study conducted in Nepal on the use of the term “*ke garne*” focused on the resilience of the tourism industry in the wake of the earthquake, where

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<sup>14</sup> This is based on accounts I heard from when I lived in the Namrata village area.

it was found that individual values and world views more strongly correlated with disaster risk reduction than demographics or socioeconomic status (Posch et al., 2019). This aligns with how family values guide student life decisions, regardless of student's socioeconomic and demographic.

Although not explicitly stating "*ke garne*," students expressed responses with a similar connotation in reference to their unrealized goals in life. When I asked students about their large life goals, some laughed remorsefully about what their dreams once were or answered what they were currently doing, rather than what they hoped to do one day. A recent study found that household wealth for girls in Nepal was strongly associated with aspirations in education, whereby those with lower household wealth were found to have lower aspirations (Madjdian et al., 2021). Fatalistic attitudes are also associated with lower self-efficacy (Madjdian et al., 2021), which was reflected in Preeti's earlier statement on the dominating effects of nature on humanity's agency. The use of "*ke garne*" or similar sayings as a coping mechanism is essential to consider for future studies, as it could be that students convey an underestimated impact on their livelihoods by using such fatalistic sayings. The extent to which this mentality is used as a coping mechanism or to limit students' aspirations would also be relevant to research to assess how students' mental health and well-being fair through disaster.

### **The Shifting Value of Education, Yet Steady Value of Family**

This final section will expand on how economic and structural barriers continue to manifest in students' lives after 10+2 schooling. At the introduction of this chapter, Prajit (19 years old, male) shared that at the end of his 10+2 schooling experience the most important thing to him was his career and making money. This differs from what students expressed as important to them in the beginning of 10+2 schooling, which was schooling and their family. However, it

became clear that post-Plus 2 pathways were plagued by the same issues that restricted students from valuing their family. Prajit's story of not being able to afford his 10+2 certificate was especially striking, for although he was supported by two scholarships, he still had outstanding debts and mental anguish. What does remain constant amongst students' aims is clear: although their dedication to education and the value of education shifts, they still uphold the value of family. Instead of applying to Bachelor's programs, Prajit was on a search for foreign work so he could make money. Most students' pathways forward focused on obtaining a job or otherwise aligning with their family's aspirations while minimizing cost.

After 10+2 schooling, students struggled with how much to prioritize their families in their decision-making. Nisha (19 years old, female) was confused with her obligations to her family and their encouragement for her to continue her studies, despite the costs.

**Nisha:** (In English) My sister think[s], uh, (voice wavers) I cannot do anything for our family now we have to do (exasperated sigh) that, she said me, she told me like that. My mother said me you have to read, you have to complete your Bachelor, and father said uh you can do what to do.

**Grace:** Aw, and what does, what does your mother say?

**Nisha:** I don't know what to..... I don't know what to dooooo. (In Nepali) But there will be loans again if I go to Japan or Korea. Now my mother says that, that despite [the loans], being able to study is a big things for us, she says this. Now the training people who send you to Korea for your Bachelor's, they ask for money and where to go [for this], it is very hard.

Many students expressed this distress in choosing to continue to study because of the higher costs of higher education, especially abroad. Students seemed to become more jaded with valuing education, as they saw the diminishing returns to their families. Many talked of plans to study or work abroad, as the possibilities to find employment in Nepal were slim. When the prospects of upward mobility fell short of their expectations, students expressed confusion under the system that promised them a productive and promising new pathway forward. This is not dissimilar to the sentiments that led to student protests during school reforms in the later 20<sup>th</sup>



century in Nepal, where students pushed back against the empty prospects they faced in their school degree (Whelpton, 2005). Kumar (20 years old, male) relayed the following plan he had in mind after he finished his last year of engineering school.

**Grace:** Oh, so after you finish engineering school you will not study more?

**Kumar:** (Laughs) I won't study. There is not enough money. There are expenses, and there is also no scholarship available, I have realized there is nothing available for us, so I cannot study. I want to study, you know? But, I cannot study (laughs) it is difficult.

**Grace:** Uh, that is difficult, so what will you do, perhaps?

**Kumar:** What? *Hajur*?

**Grace:** What will you do, perhaps? After finishing engineering school?

**Kumar:** After finishing, I will get a job. I will work as much as possible. No matter how much I study there are no jobs in Nepal. There is only a small salary, there is not enough for food so I will go abroad.

Kumar recognized the reality that finding a job in Nepal would be very difficult and discounted that his education amounted to anything if it did not connect him with employment.

With the pressure to find a job after 10+2 schooling, many students voiced complaints of career unalignment and a lack of qualifications upon graduating. While we have heard from Preeti's (19 years old, female) critiques about the impractical education at Sidhi as being, "...just for the certificate. Our education is not significantly aligned with our own lives," students studying in Kathmandu also expressed similar critiques. This points to the larger issues in the entire 10+2 education system, not simply public, rural schooling. Another city-going student wished that she had known of the benefits of simultaneously pursuing extra skill-building outside of school, such as computer skill classes, beyond just theoretical studying so that she could get a job. Students complained that they although they received their 10+2 certificates, they did not feel like they had acquired any of the qualifications. These critiques could also be directed at the loss of learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which indicates the importance of maintaining quality and practical education options for students during times of disaster. A quality education

should extend beyond its face value to include how it will create returns home for families, which is often in the form of employment for students. Students voiced the frustration of not being able to translate their education into forms of work in-country and having to migrate abroad to continue to support their family.

Over the course of my research, one student finished her 10+2 schooling and migrated to Dubai. Bhawana's (19 years old, female) qualms before leaving revealed how she was feeling about living so far from her family. Before she left Nepal, I asked her how she felt about going so far away. She denied feeling scared and instead expressed:

**Bhawana:** (With emphasis) I feel stressed/anxious (*Pir lāgcha*).

**Grace:** Stressed?

**Bhawana:** Because you are far away from your family, and you are far away from your friends. It is stressful.

Even if Bhawana's decision to migrate was in earnest for her family, it is notable that the immediate repercussions of being away from them were the toughest part of her decision. Similar to the migration of students from rural to urban areas, migration abroad is often forced for employment and opportunity not afforded in Nepal, not simply for the sake of migration. If students had the choice, they may not choose to live so far from their families to make money. While the topic of outmigration of students seeking employment and opportunities abroad would require more focused and robust research, it is important to consider the personal sacrifices students must make to continue on pathways that ultimately benefit their families. The struggles they face in 10+2 schooling, such as living away from their family and navigating new environments, may just be one of a series of similar challenges they must learn to adapt to as they are forced to travel abroad. Although Bhawana was the only student reported to commit to working abroad, it is a common pathway for graduating students to take upon finishing 10+2 schooling.

As this chapter has shown, although many students would prefer to study at home in the village for their 10+2 schooling, the realities are that these pathways are rarely idealized to support individual student desires while also benefitting their family unit. The value of education as it serves as a lever for economic and social mobility is more difficult for students to realize. After graduating from 10+2, students become even more confused about what pathways support their education, and ultimately their family, as their options become slimmer for them to make money and stay in the country. In turn, the value of education becomes much harder to translate into actual returns to family on the other side of 10+2 schooling. While the value of family is still present in students' decisions and pathways, how they realize the value of family shifts from education to their careers. The structural barriers present in students' 10+2 schooling pathways continue to limit them further down the road, as lacking social capital and corruption continue to disadvantage students from opportunities to seek employment. In conclusion, I expand further on proposed interventions that would best serve to support 10+2 students and their families in Nepal, including a new opportunity in Namrata village that may serve to benefit these students' preferences to study from the village.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

We have made the claims like this, at our school, students in the coming days will go home and can work, they will not just study. We hope that they can make money, that they can make money in the future and some other things are that at our school, if students want to be a teacher, then they should have a teaching job they like, they should accept that and have a passion. They should have the ability to fight for a spot in the teaching exam, and the bureau of the exam will be able to choose their names to do this kind of [teaching] work. This is the planning we are doing....Our Taji Valley studying students will emerge as a brand, this is our plan.

- Milan Sir (Namrata Secondary School vice principal, teacher, and community liaison, speaking about the new Taji Valley School)

To ease and support transitions into higher secondary education for students across Taji rural municipality, in 2018, plans were formed to combine multiple of the village area secondary schools into one school. This new school, called Taji Valley School, would offer 10+2 schooling only a twenty-minute walk away from the old Namrata Secondary School. Milan Sir was the vice principal at Namrata Secondary School and described why this was important for the village area.

The main reason we started the Plus 2 school is because in the village those students that are economically weak cannot study in Kathmandu and usually will drop out, and because of that problem we put a Plus 2 school in the village to control the problem.

The advent of this school offers numerous benefits for students and their families in the village area, especially as these advantages have the potential to address a range of issues raised by students throughout interviews and to support those students who would not have been able to enroll in 10+2 schooling to begin with. However, whether this new school can succeed in offsetting the struggles that students voiced about supporting their families through their education will be contingent upon whether it can economically support students and offer them a quality education at the same time. In this section I reflect on how this school holds great promise but must also address the structural barriers facing students in 10+2 schooling. For

students to truly benefit from their education and remain connected to their home communities, their educational pathways should allow them to succeed in realizing their family's aspirations.

## **Overview**

I have argued that instead of 10+2 students feeling conflicted about their responsibilities to family and schooling, they largely view education as a vehicle through which they can both demonstrate their commitment and add shared value to their family's social position. However, there are limitations to students' abilities to further their own (and by association) their families' lot in life through education, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated financial difficulties and obstructed their ability to learn successfully. Even though students may ultimately desire to remain in their home communities for 10+2 schooling, structural barriers often make this impossible. As these barriers continue to restrict students from realizing returns home to their families even after 10+2, what remains constant is not the value of education for students, but the value and obligations to family. In the remainder of this conclusion, I make some brief recommendations for policymakers before returning to the case study of Taji Valley School, as it presents both promising prospects and pitfalls of supporting 10+2 students.

## **Recommendations for Policymakers**

The issue of affordability plagues students' experiences from the onset to the exit from 10+2 schooling. Hence, more holistic, comprehensive financial support must be provided for students in 10+2 schooling. Karuna Miss, from Namrata Secondary School in the village, recognized that connections to resources overall were lacking for 10+2 students.

The schools, they need to increase the scholarship forms for students, just like ASSIST or Sansaar Foundation, the schools need to ask to join other organizations and increase the scholarship forms for intelligent students, and they need to take more initiative. And from the teachers and from the family, they can help them with financial support, they can give financial support and other forms of support.

Here, Karuna Miss advocates for schools to take greater action to support students through connecting them to government and private scholarships. However, as was relayed by the two students who received financial scholarships to cover the costs of tuition, there are associated costs with living in the city for schooling that must also be compensated. Beyond just scholarships, there should be more holistic economic support for students to pursue their studies in the location and living situation that best supports their studies and wellbeing. With decision-making and management now mandated at the local level, Nepal's emerging Education Sector Plan (ESP) must advocate for a larger budget for students to receive financial aid and include a robust distribution system, as well as monitoring mechanisms to include feedback from students. Many students raised the issue of economic troubles as the main barrier to them succeeding in 10+2 schooling.

In addition to scholarships, relief from human and natural disasters should be provided for 10+2 students and built into education and social welfare schemes. Kumar (20 years old, male) suggested that debt forgiveness would be helpful, especially as there was no support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What I would change, let's say, now, during corona, our studies have become very weak, everyone's have, every student's. So, to bring the changes, despite studies becoming weak, well we have not attended well at college, we have had to pay lots of fees to colleges even though we did not go, so if Nepal's government took away those charges then for us it would be a little easier.

Stronger support and clearer communication from the government during the pandemic could have also been in the form of remote learning resources, which should also extend to global governing systems. Moving forward, disaster risk-reduction strategies should be mandated as part of government planning, especially within the education sector. Online schooling and other viable forms of distance learning should be a key component of education planning, particularly

in areas that are vulnerable to natural disaster and climate change. Since the Himalayas are a disaster-prone region of the world, it is essential to develop resources for students in Nepal to continue their learning even in the case of flooding, disaster, or future global health emergencies.

Every secondary or higher secondary teacher in the village I interviewed critiqued the Nepali school system for not providing students with a practical education. Even the 10+2 teacher from a private law school in Kathmandu mentioned that students were drawn to law because it was relevant to their lives by engaging with current events and issues. Students also confirmed these critiques of the schooling system in Nepal as being irrelevant to their life goals and job prospects. Sagar Sir, the brother of Shanti (19 years old, female) suggested:

Uh if I were to change Nepal's Plus 2 system then...here the system is almost ok, if I had to change it generally then all the work should be related to technical education, I would teach a little technical education. And what it is now, that is the marks you study, you study the book, you give the exam it is only that, so I would bring in complete practical class for students to take. Make it practical, and therefore after studying Plus 2, from studying Plus 2 all will have work available, in this manner, I would have made the system.

Considering that students struggle to find employment and continue to benefit their families, making 10+2 education more applicable to students' interests and the job market is imperative. However, action should not just be taken to create more vocational or technical training schools for students but should also support them to pursue their true interests. Historically, when vocational schooling was emphasized in education policy in Nepal there were protests from students and less trust in the government for supporting their pathways forward (see Chapter 2). Since I taught together with Karuna Miss previously, she brought up the example of a student we taught at the basic level who struggled with schooling and attendance in school. Karuna Miss amplified how this student enjoyed the arts and drawing and that she should have more opportunities to engage in schooling to pursue these alternative interests. Hence, 10+2 education

should be made consciously more practical for students to both transition into work opportunities but also support their interests.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, students overwhelmingly expressed preferences for living at home and studying under certain conditions. These inclinations should be moved to the front of decision-making in improving the 10+2 schooling system. Instead of focusing solely on increasing scholarship schemes to pursue schooling in Kathmandu, efforts by the Government of Nepal should improve access to quality 10+2 schooling in village areas. This could include restructuring teacher certification programs to actively recruit and employ community members, incentives for higher-quality teaching practices, and regularly offering opportunities for professional development. Physical school infrastructure to support 10+2 level schooling could be incorporated into already-established secondary schools in villages and would incur only minimal construction costs. Considering the crucial role community plays in students' lives, creating more technical and vocational training or apprenticeships in the communities where students' families live could be a promising avenue for students to obtain a higher quality education in the village. This would also require creating more lucrative schooling-to-work opportunities for students. The Government of Nepal would need to make improvements to efficiencies in Nepal's domestic economy and job market and reduce the instance of *afnomanchhe* and social capital as the sole token to succeed in the formal work sector in Nepal.

### **Promises and Pitfalls Posed by Taji Valley School**

The inauguration of the new Taji Valley School building occurred in spring 2022, after my interviews with participants were already complete. When I was teaching in the village in 2018, there was talk of this project coming to fruition in the next few years. Four years later,



Class 11 admission began in the 2021 academic year, and the school building construction was completed in spring 2022. Only one student I spoke with, Preeti (19 years old, female), who went to Sidhi School, had a family member who went to Taji Valley. Her younger brother began Class 11 in a cohort of around 45-50 students, which Milan Sir noted was lower than their anticipated capacity to support 100 students, which he attributed to a delay at the rural municipality level.

There are two subjects offered for 10+2 students at Taji Valley: education and management. Ironically, these are the same subjects offered at Sidhi Higher Secondary School, which rose as a common complaint from research participants. Anish Sir, a Namrata Secondary School teacher who will begin teaching at the new school, reported that there was talk of a technical school opening at Taji Valley in the future. Additionally, Milan Sir, who played an integral role in enacting the plans for this new school, mentioned that they will be offering subjects for students based on their preferences in the coming years.

After hearing this exciting news that there would be a closer 10+2 school to Namrata, I began to wonder how Sidhi Higher Secondary School admissions would be affected. Deepson Sir, a Sidhi 10+2 teacher, admitted that admissions were down at Sidhi, however, he did not voice any animosity when we spoke about the two schools. Even though Sidhi's enrollment numbers were down, Karuna Miss, another secondary teacher at Namrata, disclosed that Sidhi Higher Secondary School was much more affordable than the new Taji Valley School. Karuna Miss explained that admission at the new school was 15,000 NPR per year (equivalent to about 125 USD), but that Sidhi Higher Secondary School was less than half the cost at 7,000 NPR per year. This appeared concerning, although one Namrata secondary teacher assured me that there would be scholarship and financial resources available eventually, after its first year of construction. The president of Nepal arranged to visit the "ribbon cutting" ceremony of the

school in the spring of 2022, which suggests that as a government school it would, theoretically, have connections to forms of financial support from the highest levels of the administration. Although costs are seemingly higher at Taji Valley School, in comparison to schooling in Kathmandu, students' costs will still significantly lessen. Students will also have a shorter commute time to school, which would ideally allow them to help their family at home more freely. Milan Sir noted that with the advent of Taji Valley School, students would also be deterred from going abroad for work.

Milan Sir: It is difficult for the students [to go abroad], but now we say to them you don't have to feel the difficulty, now we encourage them to study in the village, while staying in the village you can support your family a little bit with work, no? It is not difficult. It is good.

Grace: Ay, yes. Do those students have to give their families money support?

Milan Sir: More than money support, they support their family with work. Those that live in the home.

Remaining at home to study at Taji Valley would hopefully benefit students and their families by allowing students to live at home without extra costs, help with home responsibilities, and spend more time with their families (in the case that students have supportive living situations at home). Milan Sir relayed to me that parents in the community were very happy about the new school and shared their suggestions with the school committee. He pinpointed that the reduced economic burdens at home were the main source of parent approval of Taji Valley School.

Why are they happy, well those that are economically weak cannot go to Kathmandu to study, but from here they can, no? That is one example. And at Taji Valley there is support for the very weak students, we have managed some scholarships and because we do that, they have become happy.

Milan Sir also boasted about the school being more practical for students, and that it was allowing a new "brand" for the village area. In theory, since families are happier with their children's schooling options and reduced economic burden, the new school should offer great hope to address major issues facing 10+2 students. However, the issue of whether the short-term

benefits of students being home with their families will translate into the long-term benefits of generating returns home for their family remains unknown. The questions of the quality of education and whether students will gain access to social capital to transition into lucrative jobs after Taji Valley 10+2 schooling are pertinent to address, considering the 10+2 student accounts in this study.

Increasing opportunities for students to study higher education in their home villages should be the beginning of many systematic changes that support students in their immediate and distant goals of benefitting their families. Such changes must occur alongside other structural improvements, such as increasing advising for students on employment, to ensure that students and their families are supported after they finish 10+2 schooling. These nationwide improvements to 10+2 schooling in Nepal must be guided by students and their families' needs, as they are the ultimate beneficiaries in the education system and, as this research has unveiled, since families are valued through these educational pathways. Finally, this research should also be used to inform global conversations about strategies to support higher secondary students' educational pathways as we continue through the COVID-19 pandemic. In varying circumstances, the value of education as it is established by institutions and policymakers may in fact hold different meaning for the students who aspire to progress through the system.

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