



## LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS

# WHY DALIT STUDENTS SCORE POORLY

■ BABURAM BISHWAKARMA

*Dalits, historically and systematically excluded by a discriminatory state, lack access to government facilities and opportunities, and are under-represented in every state organ. But their presence and performance of their children in primary level education is even more worrisome. Caste-based discrimination that has stunted Nepal's social growth clearly has a bearing on the learning achievements of Dalit students. It is surely no coincidence that the so-called upper-caste students have better learning achievements than the so-called lower-caste students in all grades and subjects. It indicates a deep malaise perpetuated by the caste-based hierarchy, and could jeopardise Nepal's march towards an inclusive, progressive and prosperous country.*

## BACKGROUND: A COMPARISON

“The caste and ethnic backgrounds of students have a bearing on their learning achievements. The comparison of achievement scores of students belonging to Brahmin, Chhetri, Janajati, Dalit, Madhesi and other communities vis-à-vis the national average shows that Brahmin students tend to score the highest. Dalit and Madhesi students’ scores are lower than those of Brahmin, Chhetri and Janajati students.”

This is the conclusion of a 2016 report prepared by the Education Review Office (ERO) of the Ministry of Education (MoE) on the learning achievements of primary level students. If education is the foundation upon which our future is built, the future of Dalit students is being built on a very weak foundation. Dipak Sharma, Director at the Department of Education (DoE), says: “Learning achievement is not satisfactory at all, and it is even worse among Dalit students.”

The average achievement score is less than 50 in all subjects except Nepali at grade III. At grade V, it is less than 50 even in Nepali subject. Dalit students fare badly not just in comparison to the national average, but also in comparison to the average scores received by students belonging to every other caste/ethnicity.

The tables below illustrate how poorly Dalits students are performing:

Grade III, subject: Nepali	Grade III, subject: mathematics	Grade V, subject: Nepali
Brahmins: 61%	Brahmins: 50%	Brahmins: 54%
Chhetri: 56%	Chhetri: 46%	Chhetri: 47%
Janajati: 54%	Janajati: 47%	Janajati: 49%
Dalit: 47%	Dalit: 41%	Dalit: 44%
Madhesi: 45%	Madhesi: 45%	Madhesi: 41%
Minorities: 49%	Minorities: 42%	Minorities: 37%
Others: 51%	Others: 46%	Others: 48%

Grade V, subject: Mathematics	Grade V, subject: English
Brahmins: 56%	Brahmins: 59%
Chhetri: 50%	Chhetri: 48%
Janajati: 49%	Janajati: 47%
Dalit: 43%	Dalit: 40%
Madhesi: 50%	Madhesi: 41%
Minorities: 38%	Minorities: 42%
Others: 50%	Others: 50%

If the learning achievements of Dalit students are compared with those of other students, it will be clear that the so-called 'upper caste' students are faring much better than the so-called 'lower caste' students. The state has arranged scholarships for Dalit students to increase their access to education. But this policy has failed to produce desired results. Dr Hari Sharma, spokesperson for the MoE, says: "We still need to do a lot to ensure that Dalit students go to school and get quality education."

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## WHY DALIT STUDENTS PERFORM POORLY

Nepal's primary level education suffers from neglect. The majority of public school teachers are for primary level. They are trained compared to private school teachers. But they lack passion and commitment to teach their pupils. For them, teaching is just a job, not a mission to shape the future of children. Physical infrastructure is poor, and curricula are flawed. Without addressing these issues, it would be impossible to increase learning achievements of primary level students.

These issues are not exclusively related to Dalit students. But Dalit students, compared to non-

Dalit students, are vulnerable to the problems plaguing education system. Dalit students face more economic, social and cultural barriers in their access to education, and fixing these problems is even more important to increase their learning achievements.

After the promulgation of the new Constitution in 2015, Nepal has officially become a federal democratic republic. And, education sector is also being restructured to suit the country's federal set up. To be sure, this fiscal year's education budget has been directly sent to the newly-elected village and municipal councils. Now, local village and municipal councils are as responsible as the federal government to deliver quality education. So, they have to come up with plans and programs to ensure that Dalit and other marginalized students get quality education.

The Constitution 2015 has restructured the state, but our education system is still based on a decades-old law enacted by the Panchayat government, which was completely disconnected from the needs of the people. Because of our inability to identify new goals and formulate relevant policies, the old act continues to survive. If education sector goes off the track, the society loses its path to prosperity. But our policymakers do not seem to have understood it. The world has made strides in Information Technology (IT), science and education, but Nepal is not bothered to have an act that is in tune with these modern changes. The country needed a new Constitution, but what about a new act to guide our misguided education sector.

After the eighth amendment of the Education Act 1971, school education has been structured into two levels: primary (grade I-V) and secondary (grade IX-XII). So, the old structure of school education (primary, lower secondary and secondary) should not exist legally. But they do. In many policies, the old school system is still in operation. This amendment of the act has certainly harmonized Nepal's school education with the world, but is not able to address other important issues.

Primary education is the foundation of education. Those children who do not get receive primary education will fail to excel in higher levels, which could affect their future prospects. In many countries, the government allocates more resources for primary education than for

higher levels. In Nepal, 85 per cent of children go to public schools, and private schools cater to the remaining 15 per cent. But neither public nor private schools have given importance to primary level education, given the proportion of budget they allocate for primary students, how they manage primary teachers and in terms of education infrastructure and learning process.

Nepal's first school, which was exclusively meant for the children of the Rana rulers, was established in 1892 BS. Children of common citizens were not allowed to go to school. Some well-off families sent their children to Benaras for education. But not every one could do that. Only in 1902 BS, the country's only school was opened to common

children. Today, 35,222 schools are across Nepal, and 34,736 schools provide primary-level education (flash report, 2016). At this level, 4,135,253 students are enrolled whereas lower secondary level has 1,859,359 students. Similarly, 9,058,502 students are in secondary level. Higher secondary level has the lowest number of students (4,092,984).

Not only does primary level have the highest number of students, but it also has the highest number of teachers. Across Nepal, 197,797 primary level teachers are at work, followed by 54,624 teachers at lower secondary and 40,245 teachers at secondary level. Nearly half the country's population is made up of primary level students and teachers. Sadly, this very part

of education sector is neglected.

An alarmingly huge number of primary level teachers are under-qualified, with most unable to clear SLC exams. Primary level schools or classrooms lack sound physical infrastructure and teaching materials. It is reflected in the dismal performance of students at higher levels.

The return of investment in education sector must be evaluated by the learning achievements of students. The government allocates the biggest pie of its budget for education, and its volume is increasingly steadily. But this huge investment in education sector has failed to achieve desired results. At primary level, the national average learning achievement score is just about 50%. And there is a huge gap between the learning achievements of private and public schools.

**The government has to come up with new criteria, requiring public schools to open for at least 250 days a week. In 220 days, it would be difficult for students to even complete the course. Teachers should spend more time in class-rooms, not encouraging students to parrot text books but think creatively.**

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More than 70% students from private schools pass School Education Exams (SEE), while this percentage is around 40 at private students.

## POOR INDICATORS

The 2016 report prepared by the Education Review Office (ERO) also highlights the gap between private and public schools in terms of learning achievements. The national average score of learning achievement is just 46% at public school while this percentage goes to 67 at private schools. Even subject wise, there is a gnawing gap. The average learning achievement score of the grade III students of public schools in mathematics is just 41, which is far below than that of private schools (54%). Similarly, the average learning achievement score of the grade V students of public schools in Nepali is just 43, which is far below than that of private schools (61%).

## WORKING FOR JUST SIX MONTHS

According to the standards set by the Ministry of Education, it is enough to open public schools only for 220 days a year. Teachers working at public schools are entitled to salaries and allowances of 13 months every year. But they are not needed to work for more than 180 days. But even these lenient criteria have not been met by public schools and teachers. A public school teacher is not needed to take more than 24 classes a week. But most public school teachers work far less. On the contrary, the Private and

**Without reforms in education, it would be impossible to reform the society. To deliver quality education, we need well-trained teachers who are passionate about transferring their knowledge to pupils. As explained afore, one of the maladies crippling our education sector is the lack of passionate teachers. So, primary level teachers should be hired through a fair and open competition. We have failed to attract the best brains to teaching. Only those who struggle to pass end up becoming teachers, and these confused and low-quality teachers fail to ignite children's passion for learning.**

Boarding Schools' Organization Nepal (PABSON) has made it mandatory for all its member schools to be open for 235 days every year. Private school teachers work for at least 250 days. This explains why private schools have outperformed public schools not just in learning achievement, but in all indicators.

Private schools emphasize rigorous teaching methods and extra-curricular activities. But public schools are reckless in their conduct, not even meeting the minimum standards. Teachers are active in politics, and unflinchingly shut schools to press for their demands. They all enjoy political patronage, and firing them is out of question in the existing set up. In such a scenario, it is no surprise that Dalits are failing to perform well.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Without reforms in education, it would be impossible to reform the society. To deliver quality education, we need well-trained teachers who are passionate about transferring their knowledge to pupils. As explained afore, one of the maladies crippling our education sector is the lack of passionate teachers. So, primary level teachers should be hired through a fair and open competition. We have failed to attract the best brains to teaching. Only those who struggle to pass end up becoming teachers, and these confused and low-quality teachers fail to ignite children's passion for learning. Since poor and marginalized Dalit students need extra motivation, hiring competent teachers is

## Education in numbers

Total schools:	35,222
Primary level students	4,135,253
Lower secondary level students	1,859,359
Secondary level students	9,058,502
Higher secondary level students	4,092,984
Primary level teachers	197,797
Lower secondary level teachers	54,624
Secondary level teachers	40,245

even more important for them. New criteria for primary teachers need to be fixed, and those who have not graduated should not be allowed to sneak in.

Improvement in curricula and teaching materials is another important issue. Our school curricula are not progressive and sensitive about Dalit children. For example, annihilation of caste-based discrimination is not among the national goals of education. Unless our education system directly attacks caste-based discrimination, creating an equal system will remain as an unfulfilled dream. This is an important issue, and it has to be addressed right now.

Dalit students still face discrimination in schools. To help them concentrate on their education, it is important to create classrooms where they do not fear being discriminated against. We need to develop a system that does not tolerate discrimination not just by teachers, but also by fellow students. Discrimination-free classrooms and education methods should be made a part of our education system.

The government has to come up with new criteria, requiring public schools to open for at least 250 days a week. In 220 days, it would be difficult for students to even complete the course. Teachers should spend more time in class-rooms, not encouraging students to parrot text books but think creatively.

To provide better education for Dalit students, reforms in primary level should be Nepal's national priority. Scholarships must be given to them not just at primary level, but also at higher levels of education.

*(Baburam Bishwakarma is a journalist.)*