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FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SHIFTING TO ENGLISH MEDIUM EDUCATION IN NEPAL

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Abstract
Nepal's school education has public and private systems. Private schools are de facto English medium schools, while public schools have Nepali as a medium of instruction. However, some public schools have adopted English medium instruction, and this trend continues. In recent years, there has been a tendency for students studying in private schools to transfer to English medium public schools. In this scenario, this study explores the perspectives of the students shifting from private to English medium public schools in Nepal. This study, grounded in neoliberal ideology, adopted a phenomenological qualitative research design. Three students were purposively selected. The data were collected through unstructured interviews. The interviews were analyzed using a thematic approach. The results showed that the shift of students to English medium public schools for government-recognized certificates significantly reduced the financial burden on parents. The students found that learning in public schools with diverse learning environments was more meaningful. Both private and English-medium public schools used a dual medium of instruction (English-Nepali), with more English used in private schools. The study suggests that English-medium education in public schools in Nepal has attracted students away from English-medium private schools.

Keywords: English medium, neoliberal ideology, Nepali medium, parent, phenomenology

Introduction
Nepal is a multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural country with 124 languages spoken as mother tongues by 142 ethnic groups (National Statistics Office, 2023). The 2007 Interim Constitution recommended the adoption of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy in education that guarantees students rights to get education in their mother tongues.

Recently, some public schools in Nepal have been switching their medium of instruction (MOI) from Nepali medium instruction (NMI) to English medium instruction (EMI). Nepali public schools are supposed to be in Nepali medium. However, there has been a growing trend of shifting the MOI from NMI to EMI due to the demand of society (Ojha, 2018; Saud, 2020). People believe that English medium education brings quality to education, as seen in the results of the private schools at grade 10, which hold the national level board examination. Therefore,

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middle-/upper-social class families tend to admit their children to English medium private schools from the beginning of their schooling. Poor families also dream that their children will get an English-medium education. English medium public schools are fulfilling their dream to some extent as they are low-budget schools.

Following the global trend of using EMI in non-native English-speaking countries, EMI policy has become a widespread phenomenon in Nepal's school education system. Nepal's education reform discourse has become a dominant topic of discussion among policymakers and education reformers (Phyak et al., 2022; Phyak & Sharma, 2021; Sah & Karki, 2020), seeing the so-called quality education of private schools which have been adopting EMI policy as a selling point since the mid-1980s with increased political and economic liberalization (Caddell, 2006). The public believes that only English-medium education brings quality. As a result, public schools are also following the same trend to prove that they will provide quality education, thereby competing with the English medium private schools (Phyak, 2016; Sah & Karki, 2020).

Middle and elite-class parents provide education to their children, admitting them to private schools. Quality of education is measured in terms of the marks and percentage children get at end-of-year examinations. Pass percentage and division of the students between private and public schools are often compared at the Secondary Education Examination (SEE), previously known as the School Leaving Certificate (SLC). It seems that, after SEE, the majority of the students admitted to science and other technical subjects at grade XI are from private school backgrounds. It is often believed that it is easier for students to get an education in English in the subjects of science, engineering, and major English since these subjects are taught in English. Only those students studying science subjects are often considered the best students in Nepal. The public has a positive attitude towards science, believing that science is the subject to be studied by talented students. Therefore, even economically lower-class families dream of admitting their children to English-medium schools. Most of the families living in urban areas tend to admit their children to private schools. When the children complete basic level education, often up to grade five and/or eight, some parents want to transfer their children from private schools to English medium public schools wherever English medium public schools are available. The focus of this study is on the trend of shifting the students from private to English medium public schools.

Seeing that some of the parents had transferred their children from studying in private schools to English medium public schools, I was interested in this issue for investigation. When I was in the field collecting data for my PhD study, I found the issue of shifting the children to English medium public schools. In the school that I visited for my study, there were a few students at lower levels, but at upper levels, especially from grade six, there were many students. This issue can be a subject of discussion for school administrators, policymakers, and education reformers, and thus, this study shows its significance.

Being an international language, English is taught as a subject and/or as the MOI around the world, especially in non-native English-speaking countries. In Nepal, private schools teach all the content and English language subjects, except Nepali, in English. Most of the public schools teach almost all the subjects in Nepali medium since the Nepali language is the lingua franca of the country. Recently, some public schools have been switching their MOI from Nepali to English.

EMI is often defined as "The use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions in which the majority of the population's first language is not English" (Macaro, 2017, p.1). Although EMI is a growing global phenomenon, there is more EMI in private rather than public education (Dearden, 2014). However, EMI is a controversial issue (Macaro, 2017).

Various studies have been done around the world on English medium education in public schools (e.g. Bhattacharya, 2013; Erling et al., 2017; Paulsrud, 2016; Taguchi, 2014; Wijayatunga, 2018; Zacharias, 2013), including Nepal (e.g. Khatri, 2019; Phyak, 2014; Poudel & Choi, 2021; Sah & Li, 2018; Sah & Li, 2022; Sah & Karki, 2020; Saud, 2019; Saud, 2020). Bhattacharya's (2013) case study analyzed the teaching context, pedagogical and textbook approaches, and learning practices, which revealed that English-medium instruction leads to restricted acquisition of English. Another study by Erling et al. (2017) in the Indian multilingual classroom context found that the language of instruction can constitute a barrier to good pedagogical practice; both the teachers and the students need competence in the language of instruction, and multilingual strategies may support EMI. Paulsrud's (2016) study found that the few Swedish schools teaching content through another language tended to offer EMI; neither language learning nor 100% English instruction were the main goals of the schools. Both Ojha's (2018) and Saud's (2020) studies found the demand of parents for EMI in public schools in Nepal. Almost all the studies are about ideologies (Phyak et al., 2021; Sah, 2022), perceptions (Handayani et al., 2022; Saud, 2020), policies and practices (Amoyaw, 2019; Prasad, 2019; Sah & Li, 2020; Sah, 2022) and challenges (Handayani et al., 2022; Khatri & Regmi, 2022) of using EMI in public schools around the world.

Bhatta (2014) conducted research on the 'Public desire for private schooling in Nepal' and found that parents had a growing desire to school their children in private or boarding institutions. Since "private schools have become part of everyday life for a significant number of people, public schools centre on becoming 'boarding-like' institutions" (Bhatta, 2014, p. 68).

EMI policy of the school system of the government of Nepal has reproduced the neoliberal ideologies in education (Phyak & Sah, 2022; Sah, 2021). Moreover, the division of private policies of school education has shaped the preferences of the parents to choose either private schools or public schools based on their economic status. This has created inequalities and social discrimination among the parents and students in the country's education system. Elite and middle-class people admit their children to private schools, while low-economic-status people send their children to public schools as public schools provide free education.

There is very rich literature regarding the adoption of EMI in public schools. However, no study has been done on student transfer from English-medium private schools to English-medium public schools in the context of Nepal. Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill this gap in research.

The medium of instruction planning involves decisions about the language or languages which will be used to teach language and content courses (Hornberger, 2003; Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). In this study, students' preferences are interpreted from the perspectives of neoliberalism. Here, I have taken the choice of the parents admitting their children to English medium public schools as the neoliberal ideology. Davies and Quirke (2005) argue that the growing popularity of school

choice is linked to the spread of neoliberal ideology. "Neoliberalism is an economic and social ideology that rests upon the rule of the (globalized) market, cutting public expenditures for social services (such as education), deregulation, privatization, and the elimination of the concept of the public good (Wilson, 2017, p.170). Neoliberalism has become the dominant hegemony in education over the last four decades (Saunders, 2010).

The main purpose of this study is to explore the reasons for transferring students from private schools to English medium public schools. The following research questions are formulated to address this objective:

1. Why do parents transfer their children from private schools to English medium public schools?
2. How do students perceive this transfer?

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore why the students were transferred from English-medium private schools to English-medium public schools and how the students perceived this transfer. I adopted an interpretative paradigm for the analysis and interpretation of the result of this study. Using a descriptive phenomenology (Husserl as cited in Connelly, 2010) of qualitative research method, data were collected through unstructured interviews. Descriptive phenomenology helps to understand people's actions and motivations about a phenomenon. In Creswell's words (2013, p.76), "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon." In this study, the phenomenon of transferring students to public schools is examined.

For this study, three students were selected through a purposive sampling strategy. Since qualitative research does not recommend using a particular number of samples (Subedi, 2021), I selected only three participants purposively as informants for this study as my focus was on the information rather than the number. The students as the research participants studied in private schools up to grade seven, and from grade eight, they were admitted to English medium public schools. For ethical issues, the students were coded with alphanumeric codes as S1, S2 and S3. The participants gave their oral informed consents and their participation was voluntary. Before taking interviews, they were made clear about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the data.

The school from which the participants were selected was located in a sub-metropolitan city of Nepal. The school ran a dual medium of instruction, both Nepali and English, but the classes were conducted in the morning and day shifts. English medium was organized in the morning, with the majority of the teachers from its private fund, while Nepali medium was carried out during the day shift, and all the teachers were from government funds. Those students who could pay tuition fees study in the English medium classes, and those who could not in the Nepali medium classes. Nepali medium classes were free of charge as per the government policy, while English medium classes were low-cost parental grant classes, as the school administration claimed.

The participants' interviews were audio-recorded, after I received oral consent from them. All the interviews were taken in Nepali as it could be easier to

express the ideas of the participants. Then, the recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English. After that, these data were coded, categorized, thematized and analyzed by using a thematic approach of Braun and Clarke's (2006). Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data sets to identify, analyze and report repeated patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, the themes were analyzed and interpreted, linking them with previous studies and relevant theories.

Findings and Discussion

After the analysis of the transcribed data, five themes were generated and then interpreted. The following sections present the results and discussion of the themes.

Government recognition

The certificate of the students passing SEE from public schools in Nepal had higher recognition for scholarship and other governmental facilities than that of private schools, often known as boarding schools. If the students wanted to apply for medicine courses or any other such courses in higher education, priority was given to those passed from public schools. Therefore, parents had preferences for public schools despite the fact that they had the belief of so-called quality education in private schools. When I asked the students, "Why did you come to public school from private school?" two students said:

> S1: *We get priority for the government certificate.*
> S2: *There is a priority of certificate in government school…to get a government job or scholarship, we get priority if we pass SEE from a government school, I have heard.*

One of the reasons why parents tended to transfer their children from boarding schools to EM public schools was the government's recognition of the students' certificates. In Nepal, when students wanted to apply for any government scholarship in higher education like MBBS, there was the provision of certain marks to those who had passed public schools only. This provision attractted students to transfer from boarding schools to English medium (EM) public schools from Grades VI, VII, VIII or IX. If there was any EM public school, then some parents admitted their children to those schools from boarding schools. Both the parents and the students knew this fact. It did not mean that all students got transferred; only those who wanted to take advantage of government scholarships in higher education did so. This trend is in line with Rescher's (1969) value theory, which states that people prioritize values influencing social behaviour, here transferring to EM public schools. In fact, getting a certificate from public schools is an 'instrumental value' (worth having as a means for getting something else that is good) first introduced by Plato in the 'Republic.'

Financial burden

Students had to pay fees both in private and EM public schools in Nepal. However, there was a low fee in the name of grants from the parents to run EM public schools because the administration had to hire and pay the teachers. Most of the teachers in EM public schools were paid through self-funds taken from the

students in the name of grants. The student participants in the interviews revealed that there were low fees in public schools, and therefore, their parents got relief from paying high fees in private boarding schools. In this regard, the students responded:

> S1: *The fees are expensive there, we need to buy books and other things, but here very cheap fees and books are free.*
> S2: *Low-income parents can teach here because there is a very low fee.*
> S3: *Here is the low fee, and they don't take extra money*.

Both boarding schools (which are meant to be EM) and EM public schools took fees from the students. However, EM public schools were low-cost schools as they had low fees compared to private schools. Since these schools were affordable, low-income parents transferred their children from private schools when they could not afford the high fees of private schools for higher grades. In this way, EM public schools lessened the financial burden of the parents, giving them some kind of economic relief from paying high fees in private schools. In the context of Nepal, Saud's (2020) study also found that students were shifted from boarding schools to public schools due to low fees. Parents wanted to provide English medium education to their children because they believed that there was more quality in English medium education only.

When I was in the field of study, I asked the school administration why this trend existed. I got the response that students from private schools came to be admitted at grades six, seven, eight and nine because English medium public schools were low-budget schools in comparison to expensive private schools. The following table illustrates this phenomenon:

Table 1. Number of students enrolled in NMI and EMI classes in 2020

Class	Number of Students in Nepali Medium	Number of Students in English Medium
1	9	63
2	11	56
3	27	62
4	22	60
5	35	71
6	46	78
7	57	108
8	67	116
9	138	144
10	113	135

Table 1 clarifies that the number of students in upper classes in English medium public schools increased. The main reason is that students from private schools had shifted to English-medium public schools. This issue had also been reported by some newspapers (see Edukhabar, 2021; Ekantipur, 2021; Rai, 2021).

Meaningful learning

Public schools were said to have meaningful learning in comparison to English medium private schools. It is because there was no rote learning in public schools. Therefore, parents believed in public schools due to their desire for creative and meaningful learning. In this regard, one of the students expressed:

> S1: *They focused on rote learning, but here no rote learning; we need to write the answer ourselves.*

From this expression, it is clear that there was rote learning in private schools, as parents experienced, but public schools focused on meaningful learning. It can be because private schools were profit-oriented, and if students did not get good marks, there might not be attraction and belief of the parents about their quality. Quality of education was equated with high marks.

The way of learning in public schools is supported by Ausubel's (1968) meaningful learning theory, which is currently in a constructivist state. Meaningful learning is better in that it connects the new concept with the previous knowledge, thereby resulting in long-term memory and lasting retention of the newly acquired knowledge. Various studies have emphasized the importance of meaningful learning over rote learning in the classroom (see Karpicke & Grimaldi, 2012; Phu, 2019; Sharan, 2015; Vallori, 2014; Vargas-Hernández & Vargas-González, 2022) which proves the value of public schools in providing quality education in the context of Nepal. Rote learning is just like parrot learning; reproduction may be possible for a short time but not for long-term memory. It is a mistaken belief to equate quality education with marks if there is no meaningful learning. The essence of learning is that it is the permanent change in the behaviour of a person through experience, study, training or practice.

Learning environment

The learning environment played a significant role in the student's all-round development, including personality development. A school was a place where students spent the whole day (from 10 to 4) with the teachers and their friends. If the learning environment was suitable, students could have proper emotional, social, physical, mental and moral development. Regarding the learning environment of the schools, one of the students, coded S1, had this opinion:

> *We make more friends, and social relations can be increased. In boarding schools, there are only a few students; they are also not friendly.*

Another student named S2 said:

> *Teachers used to care much there, but here, there is no care. If we ask questions, they scold students here; whether they study or make noise, teachers do not care much here; they just come, teach and go. There was strict discipline in boarding school and much care for us, but here, no care and no discipline were maintained.*

Yet another student coded as S3 said:

> *There were strict rules there, but here, there is freedom and the friendly behaviour of the teachers. There, they had strict rules, so we were afraid and couldn't pay attention in our studies, we became nervous, fearing that we might make any mistake and get punished….but here is not that kind of environment, we are not afraid…teachers care much there…we can learn more if we get friendly behaviour and if we get freedom.*

The above expressions suggest that there were different learning environments in private schools and public schools, although both were English medium schools. Private schools followed strict discipline, so there was always a fearful environment. Punishment was a traditional way of treating students if they did anything wrong or if they were not learning. The participants opined that boarding schools created fear in the learners with strict discipline and too much control over the students. However, public schools had freedom, to some extent, with no strict discipline. Since there were more students in public schools than in private schools, learners got wider experiences, making many friends and having free talks with them.

Fear and punishment were based on Pavlovian conditioning. In fact, punishment was undesirable as it caused fear in learning rather than motivating the learners to learn more. Students had no positive attitude towards private schools because of strict discipline and too much control to them focusing just on parrot learning. It clarifies that punishment could never be good and that it only created fear rather than motivation to learn. Students needed freedom and wider experiences for their personality development.

In relation to care, private schools were preferred to public schools. There was much care in private schools because they wanted to attract the students with proper care and attention towards their learning. Watson's (1997) theory of caring suggests that human caring creates favourable conditions in the minds of people so that there can be positive attitudes towards the caretakers. Public schools were criticized for not taking proper care of the learners even though there was freedom to some extent. The study by Bhatta (2014) also found that the teachers from private schools were caring while the teachers from public schools were qualified; there were strict rules and good discipline with punishment in private schools, whereas there was no discipline and no punishment with loose control to the students in public schools.

Comparative medium of instruction

Teaching-learning activities in an educational institution were conducted by adopting a certain medium of instruction (MOI) as a means of imparting knowledge to the students. Mostly, the national language became the MOI, but as an international language, English had also become the MOI in non-native English-speaking countries (Bradford, 2016). Private schools in Nepal exclusively used English as a medium of instruction (EMI), while public schools used the Nepali language. However, there had been a growing trend of public schools in urban areas adopting EMI. The school from which I selected the participants for this study had used the EMI policy so that students from private schools tended to transfer here.

The student participants I interviewed expressed that there was more EMI in private schools than in public schools, and this is in line with Dearden's (2014) study. Here are the excerpts from their interviews:

> S1: *Only the medium is English, but teachers mostly teach in Nepali there and here. We can ask in Nepali in both schools.*
> S2: *We can talk in Nepali in both schools, we can ask in Nepali in both schools….much use of English in boarding school.*
> S3: *We could talk and ask in Nepali in both…much use of English there.*

English medium schools were by name only, but they followed dual mediums, both English and Nepali, in the context of Nepal. One of the participants revealed this fact. Saud's (2020) study also shows that there is no purely EMI in English medium schools, may they be either private or public. However, private schools used more EMI than public schools, as the expressions suggestted. The students could ask questions in the EMI classrooms in English or Nepali. It is supported by Glasser's (1999) choice theory as a neoliberal ideology. Those students who could speak English could ask questions in English, and those who could not could ask in Nepali. As such, there was no true spirit of EMI in those schools.

Conclusion

This study has explored the reasons for transferring students from private schools to an English medium public school located in one of the districts of Nepal. The reasons were mainly the recognition of the certificate for any governmental opportunity like scholarship and financial relief for the parents of paying a high fee in private schools. As the student participants experienced, there was meaningful learning in public schools, unlike rote learning in private schools with different learning environments. At the same time, the medium of instruction was dual in both types of schools, with a more English-speaking environment in private schools.

Middle- and upper-class parents tended to admit their children to private schools from the beginning. However, some parents had the tendency to transfer their children to English medium public schools from the upper grades, especially from grades VI, VII, VIII, or IX, if there was the option of such schools in the locality. As a result, the number of students in upper grades in public schools increased, as Table 1 shows.

This study has some delimitations in that it was done by taking the perspectives of only three students from an English-medium public school in an urban area. Therefore, taking the perspectives of the teachers and the parents can be a further issue of investigation. Similarly, this is a small-scale qualitative study. Therefore, a large-scale population on this issue can be taken so that the findings can be generalized. Moreover, as this study does not address the comparative performance of the students between private and public schools, this can be one of the areas for further study.

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