



Negotiating Equality: Mapping The Integration in Diverse School Culture

***Virender Kumar Chandoria, **Pooja Singh, ***Shikha Vajpai**

*Assistant Professor (Education), Department of Education, University of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: chandoriakr@gmail.com

**Assistant Professor (Education), College of Teacher Education, Nuh, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Telangana, India.

Email: singhpja@gmail.com

***Shikha Vajpai, Maharishi Dyanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

Abstract

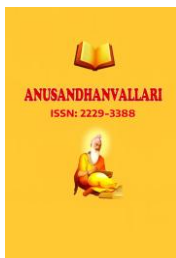
This research paper investigates the concept of equality and integration within educational settings, particularly examining how schools integrate students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Our objectives are to explore how schools can foster sensitivity to issues of inequality among students, assess the impact of heterogeneous school populations on student perspectives, and analyze how language of instruction can nurture a culture of integration. This study aims to contribute to the discourse on educational equality by illuminating the diverse voices of students and the role of school environments in shaping their understanding of integration and equality.

Keywords: Equality, Integration, Diverse School, Ethos.

Introduction

Our aims to examine the concept of equality as it manifests in different schools, particularly focusing on the integration of students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Our interest in exploring students' voices on equality arises from our previous study on the challenges faced by underprivileged children. We were captivated by the stark differences in opinions we found among students from Central-funded Kendriya Vidyalaya compared to those from an elite private school. Additionally, our experiences as ethnographers exposed us to the difficult conditions in Municipal Corporation of Delhi and Delhi government schools. To delve deeper into how children's voices are influenced by their social contexts and school experiences, we have decided to focus our research on issues of equality and integration in education. Equality is often an elusive term and as Lucas (1965) points out, "equality is a great political issue of our time. The demand for equality obsesses all our political thought. We are not sure what it is but we are sure that whatever it is, we want it" (Lucas, 1965: 296). The term equality has several referents in education. Researchers, sociologists, political scientists and educationists have tried to look at equality with respect to various aspects like school finances, expenditures, and resources. Access to curriculum classroom processes, outcomes and eventual pathways of students. For educationists, 'a fundamental concern is whether education can be a source of progressive change and transformation or if it inevitably reflects and reproduces the inequalities existing in society' (Jencks, 1972).

The present research paper acknowledges a wide array of literature addressing the relationship between education and equality, informed by various theoretical perspectives. These include Functionalism, drawing on the works of Durkheim, Parsons, and Turner; Conflict Theory, with leading theorists such as Bourdieu and Passeron, Bowles and Gintis, and Apple; and Resistance Theory, highlighted by the writings of Willis. Considering the complex



nature of equality in education in a modern society, we have specifically focused on the economic background, though the discussion also takes into account other factors such as caste, gender, etc which operate conjointly with it.

Comprehensive Education for All: Ensuring Equality

Recent research across various countries has demonstrated that increased social segregation in school intakes leads to greater educational inequality, while greater heterogeneity in intakes helps reduce it. A review by Susan Holloway on concepts of ability and effort among school children indicates that Japanese students are significantly more likely than their American peers to attribute their achievements to effort rather than innate ability. Additionally, studies on school segregation in the USA and Scandinavian countries highlight the benefits for both privileged and underprivileged students when they learn together in integrated classrooms (Dupriez and Dumay, 2006). Green (2023) further emphasized this point in their analysis of inequality in school systems worldwide, identifying factors that contribute to it. They noted that East Asian and Nordic countries, which exhibit lower levels of educational inequality, tend to have non-selective schools and mixed ability classes that minimize significant branching points, such as subject specialization or tracking, until the end of compulsory education.

Research Objective

To examine how school culture-including diversity in student composition and language of instruction-shapes students' sensitivity towards issues of equality and inequality, and influences their understanding of integration across socio-economic and cultural differences.

Methodology

This research is framed within the phenomenological paradigm, inspired by the works of Husserl and Schutz (1967). This approach emphasizes the human element in research, focusing on the contexts and events that shape the experiences of participants, including teachers and students. It necessitates that the researcher seeks to understand not only observable behaviors but also the contextual factors and underlying motives that influence those behaviors (Creswell, 2007). In the process of data collection, we have planned phases i.e. Phase-I: To examine the differences among students from varying economic backgrounds, we selected a government-aided school in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, primarily serving very low-income children, alongside an elite private school in Delhi, which mainly enrolls students from affluent families. Additionally, we included a centrally funded Kendriya Vidyalaya in Delhi, a government school that features a diverse student body representing a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Phase-II: To examine the Right to Education (RTE) and its provisions for equal opportunity in education, we selected a school in Nuh, Haryana, for a detailed case study. Phase-III: To understand the language policy, we focused on a language minority school in Nuh, Haryana. In these phases we were conducted focus group discussions with students from Classes VI to VIII in groups of 4-5 to stimulate them to share their understanding and experiences through peer interaction. During these children engaged in actively discussing, debating, reflecting and cross questioning each other in a spontaneous manner, without much intervention from the researcher, who could listen and record rather than interrogate. In addition to conducting FGDs with students, we also engaged in Semi-structured interviews of teachers and the principal of each school on various themes like aim of education, role of English, qualities of successful student, role of competition etc. We had some basic questions in mind but the interview was largely unstructured and allowed teachers to share their other experiences and insights whenever required. We also engaged in non-participatory observations of



classrooms (critically looking at the issue of the medium of instruction, teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, teaching learning methods and materials used and participation of students in the teaching learning process). A study of school records of enrolment and analysis of the school diary was also done to focus on the aims of education, and prescribed rules and regulations for students. Analysis of children's thematic writings written in both English and Hindi was done to study children's expression and how it may differ across schools. The transcripts of FGDs, interviews, and observation schedules, were subjected to repeated readings highlighting of significant statements and construction of thematic codes using a qualitative analysis framework grounded in the writings of Gibbs, Flick, and Moustakas. These themes were then subjected to constant 'comparison method' at various levels across schools and also within each school. It is interesting to note how the voices of students as well as teachers and principals varied across schools, and were embedded in the ethos of that school.

School Ethos

School ethos is most frequently associated with the overall character, or 'climate' of the school. A school's culture includes the underlying set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals, traditions and policies as well as the social interactions that occur within these structures which gives a school its look and feel as 'friendly', 'elite', 'competitive', 'inclusive' and so on. Thapan's (2006) views school culture as the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that influence everything that happens within a school and is demonstrated through academic and educational aspirations, the nature of personal relations and attitudes and responsibilities practiced and taught at the school by various stakeholders (Thapan, 2006). In the present study, school culture is viewed through the following-

- The philosophy and aim of education
- Processes, activities and rituals of school
- The physical and visible aspects of school, and
- The kind of relationships that exist between school staff, teachers and students.

Aim of Education: Beliefs, Voices and Notions

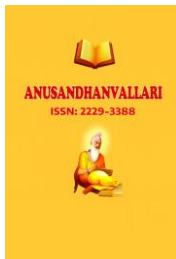
Govt. Added School at Paryagraj, Uttar Pradesh: The principal of the Govt. Added School remarked that, "main aim of education is all round development of personality", However, he regretted that in spite of all his efforts, "the parents here are least concerned about how their child is doing at school. They don't even come for meetings with us, Education is a two way process and if school doesn't get parental support, it can't do miracles in five and a half hours". He further remarked that since all children in his school were coming from economically backward families with parents 'unwilling to send their children to school, education just became a formality'. "In such a context education just becomes a ritual, that because the child has come to our school, we should try that he may pass. I will say that if all students here get thirty three per cent, the school is providing quality education. That is also a great achievement for these students". The principal equated the notion of quality of education with the examination scores and assumed that students cannot achieve more than a given pass percentage. School teachers also expressed a similar kind of belief about the capabilities of students....."*Yeh bacche mushkil se exam pass kar pate hain, koi chhota-mota kaam hi karenge. Ye age nahi bhad sakte*" (These children hardly pass the exam, then they have to do small work. They cannot move ahead). The school principal and teachers held minimal expectations for students regarding their academic achievements. Research indicates that teachers' negative perceptions of students' potential can significantly contribute to their underperformance, Additionally, teachers expressed frustration over the lack of parental support for children's education. Issues such as parents' inability to supervise homework, ensure their children are well-nourished for school, and attend meetings were cited as signs



of inadequate support. There was a prevailing belief that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were only expected to meet minimal schooling requirements and would ultimately follow in their family's occupational footsteps. Consequently, the school positioned itself as preparing students for their predetermined roles within an unequal social structure (Althusser, 1971). It was interesting to note that teachers held that education is important for these children who come from "poorest families" for the purpose of moral training. Discipline, cleanliness, good behavior and obedience were the four qualities that almost all teachers were looking for in their vision of a successful child. This "civilizing agenda of school has almost been timelessly and righteously imposed on poor children where the discipline of school is meant to be contrasted with the chaos and squalor in their homes" (Rampal, 2009). However, students at this school strongly challenged the assumptions of their teachers and principal. Despite facing difficult circumstances at home, these children viewed education as a pathway to liberation from their cycle of poverty. Their perspective reflects a resilience and determination to leverage education as a means to improve their circumstances and aspire to a better future. For instance, Sonu (class VIII) whose parents are uneducated and his father runs a carpentry shop, emphasised that, "Garib ko padhai ki asli kimat pata hoti hai. Garib bacche sochte hain ki humare papa garib hain, lekin hum mehnat karke pass honge, acche number layenge, aage badhenge aur unka naam roshan karenge." The Public Report on Basic Education (1999) had also falsified the widely held myth of the 'unwilling masses' who are not interested in school.

The Elite Private School at Dwarka, Delhi: The principal of this school pointed that, "we call our school a 'world' school because it provides "world class infrastructures, with air conditioned classrooms, a whole lot of co-curricular activities and 'smart' classes (using interactive boards). Then we teach them world languages and organize international exchange programmes" However, the fee charged for such foreign trips, as pointed out by the students, was up to four five lakh rupees which made even "the richest of the rich parents to think twice before sending their kids". The School Diary included a message from the principal desk which said "this world school is a new beginning towards global thinking - a significant step towards a global responsibility". It further stressed that the school takes responsibility of creating world citizens out of its students. However, the school was making a 'world citizen' by increasingly segregating its students from the majority of children living in difficult circumstances, in their own country. The school teachers confessed that, "these children belong to elite backgrounds and are most pampered by their parents, so it is not much that the school or teachers can do with them". Students' ideas of a model school are consonant with the ethos of exclusivity nurtured by the school and they hold that it 'should have a good name and reputation in society, where children are allowed to bring laptops, where teachers are smart and children's views are accepted, and where each child has a separate locker facility'. They further expressed that education is important for them to become 'most powerful' and to influence others, in creating their own business, attaining Degrees and settling abroad, thereby making their life successful.

Majority of students said that they would like to establish friendship with children belonging to the same economic status, who distribute nice gifts and take them to malls on birthdays, who live in posh colonies and so on. Teachers often explicitly or tacitly conveyed the significance of maintaining segregation and similarity of status in social settings. For instance in one of the Social Science eight standard observed, while teaching a chapter titled 'Understanding Marginalisation' the teacher blatantly told the students that the '*Marginalised people who were of a certain social status. They would not as per elite because they didn't have money Just like we make friendship with those who are at par with us and who are well situated, so in the same way the elite also would not like to be familiar to marginalised people*', Students of this school could not imagine a life which would compromise on the comforts that were part of their primary socialization at home (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) in fact, the school acted to further entrench their conditioning as children of rich parents, by providing them facilities like air conditioned classrooms and buses, foreign trips, and interactive boards in classrooms, etc. Indeed the hegemony



of projecting 'quality' by showcasing the visibly cost-intensive environment of schools is part of the cultural reproduction affected by the economically elite urban sections of our society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970).

Kendriya Vidyalaya at Delhi: According to the principal "The school provides equal opportunities to every child. We never give importance to categories such as poor or rich, scheduled caste and tribes, the gender of the child or his religion. We try to nurture equality in all our school practices by giving equal chances to all children to participate in all school events". The School Diary begins with the preamble to our Constitution, highlighting the words justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. It also mentions article 51 A of the Constitution emphasizing on values like unity and integrity, national service, harmony and spirit of common brotherhood. Every day in the school assembly children loudly chanted the pledge of the school which stated, "India is my country and all Indians are my brothers and sisters. I love my country and I am proud of its rich and varied heritage. I shall always strive to be worthy of it. I shall give respect to my parents, teachers, classmates and all elders and treat everyone with courtesy. In their well being and prosperity alone, lies my happiness - Jai Hind!". Most of the students of KV believed that education has an important role to bring about change in society by removing 'social evils' and aiming to create a 'good person' with concern for others, not for one's own selfish interests. Indeed, the Class XII topper of the same school, Asif Ali, whose father is a government servant actually left his home to live in a slum for six months with his class friend who is a first generation Learner to "give him company while preparing for the exams and to share his experience". Children's views seem to be influenced by the kind of diversity they have personally experienced. We observed that teachers as well as the school principal were sensitive towards children's needs. For instance, teachers willingly gave extra time and even emotional support to students. Teachers held that a successful school is one where teachers also follow discipline and practice what they teach, where the teacher student relationship is strong, based on cooperation, and where teachers have a command over their subject. All students, irrespective of their backgrounds, study, play and eat lunch together, KV is an example of a school where rich and poor students could study together peacefully.

To highlight the stark contrasts in perspectives from different types of schools, it's important to consider the influence of their socioeconomic contexts and the unique experiences shaped by each educational environment. For instance, students at the government-aided school in Prayagraj viewed education as a pathway to gaining respect in society, achieving independence, and bringing pride to their parents and community. They recognized the necessity of studying to rise above their parents' ongoing struggles with unemployment and poverty. For these children, education represented a crucial means of breaking free from the cycle of hardship and creating a better future, whereas the students from the elite private school saw education as a stamp of legitimacy, which would give them even more power to control the lives of others and distance themselves further from the majority of the country's children. Education was considered important to attain degrees and skills to help settling abroad, thereby abdicating any sense of responsibility for the state of the nation. Students from KV, however expressed that education is important for removing the ills in society and aiming to create a good person, who treats everyone equally and is ready to offer help to others. For most of them the notion of personal success was collectivistic, to achieve something in life by which they can be of use to others. For example, by becoming a police officer they expressed that they will reduce crime in society. They believed that an educated person owes a responsibility for the entire community and nation at large.

A Case Study of a School at Nuh, Haryana

In order to specifically look at the effects of integration of students across economic lines, we also did a case study of a private school, which is consciously attempting to integrate twenty five percent of its students from poor families including street children, slum children, domestic child labor, trafficked children and mentally, physically



or sexually abused children. The Private School believes that, "education is a liberating influence which must be open to all, regardless of class, creed, income or even talent and has the potential to challenge social equations" (cited from a School Board). The school also supports another group of around 250 children in all their needs like food, uniform, medicines, safe and secure shelter, books and practically everything that children need, to stay in school. From class onwards, every class from the regular school has two periods scheduled per week devoted for the 250 student with whom the regular students interact on a one on one basis. In the context of the hardship of implementation of 12 (1) (c) of RTE Act regarding to admit twenty five percent children from economically weaker sections, the Private School becomes an exemplar in its approach towards equality by working to integrate fifty percent of its poor, non-fee paying students along with the other half from well off families.

Language policy of the school

However in spite of its attempts towards integration the school looked towards English medium education as one of the means to empower its children particularly those belonging in lesser privileged sections of society The school principal stated that they have 90 children studying in various classes integrated into English medium programmes at Varying levels. Even students viewed English medium education as a means to upgrade the status and respect they get in society The school teachers also expressed a similar view stating that the earlier we start teaching in English medium, the better it is. They believed that since the school had many children from economically weaker sections of society - where English is not spoken at homes, English medium education gives such children a chance to improve their language skills at school. This is a complex issue and reflects several strands of thinking for instance, mistaken notions of modernity and questionable ways to integrate people in what is perceived to be the global market. This study also attempted to explore this often neglected but significant aspect of language as a medium for integration, by documenting the initiatives taken by a Government University MANUU, hereby named MANUU Modal School, District-Nuh, Haryana. This school offers education in Urdu medium with a belief that young children learn better in their mother tongue. Even though this research is focusing on how the concept of equality unfolds itself in diverse school cultures, it acknowledges influences of children's home culture which they have achieved through their primary socialization, beginning from their family and neighborhood Children bring to school their social beliefs and understandings, which interface with the culture of school, that may accept, denigrate, question or reinforce those through its processes and policies. This study is one attempt to understand how students, teachers and principals contribute to the shaping of diverse school cultures on issues of equality and integration

Conclusion

This Study Showing the contrasting educational experiences and beliefs surrounding the aim of education in different socioeconomic contexts. In the government-aided school in Prayagraj, the principal and teachers expressed minimal expectations for students, equating quality education with merely passing exams. Their focus on discipline and moral training underscored a belief that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were only capable of meeting basic educational standards. Conversely, students viewed education as a vital pathway to escape poverty, demonstrating resilience and ambition in the face of adversity. In the elite private school in Dwarka, Delhi, the narrative shifted dramatically. Here, education was synonymous with privilege, opportunity, and global citizenship, reinforcing a sense of exclusivity among students. Their aspirations were often tied to personal success and power, revealing a disconnect from the broader societal challenges faced by many of their peers. This environment perpetuated a cycle of segregation, where the affluent distanced themselves from the struggles of the majority. Kendriya Vidyalaya represented a middle ground, emphasizing equality and inclusivity. The school's practices and ethos aimed to foster a sense of community and collective responsibility, encouraging



students to see education as a means to improve society rather than merely a path to individual success. The case study of a private school integrating students from economically weaker sections illustrated the potential for education to serve as a liberating force. By consciously working towards inclusion, the school aimed to challenge existing social hierarchies, demonstrating the transformative power of equitable education. Lastly, the exploration of language policy underscored the complexities of integration. While English medium education was viewed as a tool for empowerment, it also raised questions about identity and accessibility for children from marginalized backgrounds. Conversely, the MANUU Modal School's emphasis on Urdu medium instruction highlighted the importance of mother tongue education in fostering inclusivity and understanding among diverse student populations. Overall, this study emphasizes that educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping students' beliefs and aspirations. The contrasting perspectives reveal how socioeconomic backgrounds, school cultures, and language policies intertwine to influence educational outcomes and social integration. It is imperative for educators, policymakers, and communities to recognize these dynamics to create inclusive environments that genuinely reflect the values of equality and opportunity for all students. Through this understanding, we can work towards an educational landscape that not only acknowledges diversity but actively promotes social justice and empowerment.

References

1. Althusser, L. (1972). *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays*. Monthly Review Press.
2. Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. Sage.
3. Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
4. Dhruv, V., & Dumay, X. (2006). Inequalities in school systems: Effect of school structure or of society structure? *Comparative Education*, 42(2), 243-260.
5. Durkheim, E. (1956). *Education and sociology*. Free Press.
6. Flick, U. (2007). *Designing qualitative research*. Sage.
7. Green, A. (2023). *Education and state formation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Holloway, S. D. (1988). Concepts of ability and effort in Japan and the United States. *Review of Educational Research*, 58(3), 327-345.
9. Jencks, C. (1972). *Inequality*. Basic Books.
10. Lucas, J. R. (1965). Against equality. *Philosophy*, 40, 296-307.
11. Luckmann, T., & Berger, P. L. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. The Penguin Press.
12. Rampal, A. (2009). *Education for all: Mid-decade assessment reaffirming the vision for quality and equality in education*. NUEPA.
13. Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Northwestern University Press.
14. Thappan, M. (2006). *Life at school: An ethnographic study*. Oxford University Press.