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Navigating Double Alienation: A Narrative Inquiry into Educational Resilience and Identity Negotiations among Dhimal Students in Eastern Nepal

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Abstract

This article explores the educational resilience and identity negotiation among Dhimal students from Morang district in Nepal. There is growing attention to the educational deprivation of indigenous communities. However, Dhimal, as an indigenous community, and their education, how they navigate, negotiate, and perpetuate learning despite language barriers, cultural, and economic constraints. Using narrative inquiry based on life history interviews to explore students' lived experiences at school, at home, and in the community, it was found that students were subjected to double marginalization. Specifically, students faced challenges from land loss and poverty while experiencing cultural exclusion in Nepali medium schools where Dhimal language, history, and identity are remarkably absent. Yet, education among Dhimal students remained strong due to family encouragement, peer support, teachers' guidance, and a sense of responsibility for prospects. There are, however, tensions between cultural identity and the gradual weakening of everyday practices. This article concludes that resilience among Dhimal students is not a subjective characteristic, but a Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

relational and culturally contextual process shaped by identity, family, and community in lived experience.

Keywords: Dhimal, Indigenous Education, Language Barrier, Socioeconomic Hardship, Identity

Introduction

Education is a fundamental component of personal growth. It is also considered a pathway to social mobility, creating better opportunities in life. However, education is not based on the principle of equality. Families invest in education, hoping that the next generation can participate in the social, political, and economic spheres of life at various levels. Educational institutions like schools are socially constructed and largely shaped by distinctive histories, languages, and cultures, and are also embedded within the power relations of specific cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. Scholars have argued that schools are not merely culturally neutral institutions, but rather they reproduce and reinforce existing social hierarchies and inequalities. Those who hold power through knowledge and are most comfortable with the social order recognize these institutions and legitimize the social organization (Apple, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The educational experiences of indigenous people are mediated by the tensions within the power-knowledge nexus as well as by contingent settings. Formal education is often considered a means of inclusive learning. The education of indigenous people in terms of their culture, language, history, and knowledge is often excluded and overlooked in research across the globe. Educational structures are based on dominant cultural codes; thus, Indigenous people are forced to navigate systems that may not reflect the reality as they know it in their own age or culture. So, success in education is not only about academic achievement but also about negotiation of cultural differences, identity anxiety, and unequal power relations. These issues are closely linked to the country's social and political history. Nepal is a country of linguistic, ethnic, and Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

cultural diversity. The formal education system, as it developed, was part of a national, state-driven project centered on a common language and a shared curriculum, with national culture as the focus. Education largely reflected the language, values, and history of the majority Khas-Arya people through school (Bista, 1991; Lawoti, 2005; Onta, 2006). Education was presented as an institution that served all the people, but it often relied on people's cultural values of knowledge, citizenship, and language.

For Indigenous peoples termed as "*Adivasi Janajati*" in Nepal, formal schooling means going to schools that are culturally different from homes and communities where they live. Nepali has been the most common language of instruction, and Indigenous languages have received little recognition (Phyak, 2013). Educational programs have also usually placed a lot of emphasis on historical and cultural explanations of Indigenous people before and after school, as well as on their oral traditions (Onta, 2006). As a result, many Indigenous children find themselves separated from the cultural environment of home and school.

Language is of great importance in this educational divide. Children who start school speaking Indigenous languages need to be taught the content of their studies in Nepali, which is not their primary language of communication (Phyak, 2013; UNESCO, 2016). Such language differences can affect participation in the classroom, comprehension, confidence, and engagement in school. Students may not want to participate, may be mute in classrooms, or may find it difficult to share what they know in their home language with others. Such difficulties are often defined as deficiencies in learning one's own language, but more often they are simply the result of broader educational and language policies. But educational inequality goes beyond just language. Indigenous students may also experience subtle forms of cultural exclusion when school curricula, teaching practices, and institutional cultures fail to recognize their histories, identities, and knowledge traditions. Exclusion is not only about direct discrimination; it is also about silence, absence, and non-recognition. Students go to Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

school with their peers but seldom encounter their culture, language, and/or history in the materials and practices schools provide for them. Such experiences affect students' sense of belonging and their perception of themselves as learners.

In recent years, despite several political changes in Nepal, including democratization, constitutional reform, and the formation of a federal republic, there are still educational inequities among Indigenous communities. Education policies today are largely focused on inclusion, equity, cultural diversity, and mother-tongue education. But in many Indigenous societies, participation, completion, and access to higher education remain very poor (CBS, 2012; Rai, 2017). Research has attributed this disparity to poverty, geographical isolation, language barriers, and educational resources. But while these are all important, such explanations tend to be deficit-based and portray Indigenous people through stories of disadvantage. It is this deficit perspective that often overlooks the strengths and agency that are present in families and communities of the Indigenous people. They often assume that failure in education is expected, and success is exceptional. These views do not recognize how Indigenous students, families and communities work to learn at the same time, despite social, cultural and economic obstacles.

Resilience is an alternative view of it, and early resilience research often depicted resilience as a trait or characteristic of a person. More recent research has defined resilience as the relational and socio-ecological processes of interaction among people, families, communities, institutions, and the broader social conditions (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2011). Educational pathways are shaped not only by personal effort but also by family relations and community support, cultural identity, institutions, and structural constraints. A socio-ecological understanding of resilience is particularly relevant to Indigenous education. Indigenous students' educational work is often grounded in complex social, cultural, and material realities. As Ungar (2011) notes, resilience is not merely individual perseverance but also the capacity to negotiate and Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

sustain access and resources in various contexts. It involves continuous negotiation between agency and structural constraints. The structural constraints and conditions of resilience have to be recognized (Joseph, 2013). Dhimal, recognized as an indigenous community, are inhabitants of the Eastern Terai region, particularly Morang and Jhapa districts in Nepal. Agriculture, forests, river bays, or communal lands characterize the living areas of Dhimal. The social and cultural lives of the Dhimal community are fundamentally based on kinship networks, collective labor, sharecropping, and strong ties of cultural practices. The use of the Dhimal language remained the effective medium of transmitting knowledge, histories, culture, values, and tradition over generations; however, the social, economic, political, and ecological dynamics have rapidly transformed the condition of the Dhimal community in recent decades.

Land dispossession, environmental change, migration, and changing labor markets have altered how people live and led to significant economic uncertainty. With this evolving world, education has become even more important for social mobility, jobs, and economic security. However, for many Indigenous students, the experience of formal education is at least partly about entering institutions where Dhimal language, culture, and ways of knowing are not fully understood. There are two dimensions of marginalization in education. The first is linguistic and cultural marginalization: students arrive in schools where they experience the lack of recognition of their language and culture. The second is the economic and material insecurity that is caused by poverty, environmental uncertainty, and limited access to resources. Educational participation must be a challenge of cultural and economic development simultaneously. Educational success cannot be viewed solely as a result of individual effort but must be examined in terms of social and structural conditions. Although there has been increasing research on educational inequalities in Nepal by Indigenous people, much of the research has been on barriers, disadvantages, and patterns of exclusion. There is less research on how Indigenous students understand and navigate educational challenges in Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

their own lives. Indigenous students' voices are often underrepresented in the existing literature, and little is known about how they construct meaning in education, how they use support systems, and how they continue learning even when they are at odds with others.

Narrative inquiry is a useful tool to fill this gap. Narrative inquiry starts from the view that people make sense of their lives through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Rather than viewing experiences as things that have happened in isolation, narrative inquiry examines how individuals connect past, present, and future experiences through time, social connections, and place. This approach is appropriate for Indigenous educational research as storytelling is a prominent feature of many Indigenous knowledge traditions. Narrative inquiry helps researchers see educational experiences not just as outcomes or events, but as lived and interpreted journeys grounded in relationships, aspirations, identities, and social conditions. Based on this, the present study examines the educational experiences of three Dhimel men from Morang District who graduated from higher education and pursued professional careers in education. Through their life stories, I want to know how resilience in education was established, sustained, and negotiated in changing social, cultural, and economic contexts.

The study is driven by three research questions: (1) How did linguistic and cultural identities shape the early educational experience of participants? (2) What kinds of support, motivation, and encouragement did they have to continue their education? And (3) what was the way that people worked through economic, institutional, and social barriers throughout their educational journey? In this article, I have argued that Dhimel learners' educational resilience does not stem solely from success in life and academic achievement. Rather, resilience is about the interplay of relationships, cultural identity, institutional experiences, economic reality, and personal aspirations. The Indigenous learner stories are the center of my research, and I hope to contribute to the Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

dialogue on Indigenous education, educational resilience, social justice, and educational inequality in Nepal.

Methods and Material

This study adopted a qualitative explanatory method using a life-history approach, viewing education not as an isolated event but as an unpredictable journey shaped by time, memory, and environmental changes. A life-history approach allows participants to present from within and connect their personal experiences with broader social structures (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Instead of measuring success by outcomes such as degrees or employment, this analysis allows exploration of how meanings of education, adversity and identity evolve (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Education is not only a matter of individual choice but is also constrained by family decisions, economic shocks, language barriers, motivation and encouragement, and socioeconomic contexts. Therefore, this study uncovers the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints, and the changing dynamics of this interplay, rather than perceiving an individual's success or failure as merely individualistic (Ungar, 2011; Joseph, 2013).

The study was conducted in Belbari Municipality, Morang District, Nepal. This municipality comprises most of the Dhimal population, and livelihoods are characterized by agriculture and wage labor (CBS, 2021). Three Dhimal men were purposively selected and interviewed. These academically sound participants were selected but did not represent Dhimal youths to gather key information about resilience, support systems, and ongoing identity negotiation (Unger, 2011). Pseudonyms Sanjeev, Kedar, and Lekh were used to identify participants and ensure their privacy. These three participants were educators and members of a specialized school in the Dhimal communities, aged between 30 and 40 years at the time of the interview. Due to economic deprivation, language barriers, and no regular educational access and facilities, students' dropouts in schools within the Dhimal community remained remarkably high (CBS, 2021; Rai, 2017). The participants' life stories provided valuable Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

insights and evidence that education continues despite frequent disruptions and constraints.

These lived experiences of participants simply go beyond hidden statistical interpretation of inequality in education, illuminating the relational work of staying in an educational organization (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions in Nepali, as is common for understanding, and lasted approximately two to three hours. Interviews were conducted in a highly familiar context for participants, ensuring open, undistracted conversations. Interviews incorporated questions related to participants' life events, including early childhood education, family context, crisis and transition periods, teachers and peers, economic constraints, and cultural and linguistic identity. Rather than using structured questions, participants were encouraged to share their lived experiences of educational resilience and identity negotiations, guided by the study's key themes. This flexibility during the interview provides detailed descriptions and an understanding of participants' perceptions and natural interpretations (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). All interviews were recorded on an audio tape recorder with the informed consent of participants. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and key themes were developed and translated into English. The participants' tone and emotion during the interview were considered when translating the interview recordings, rather than relying solely on detailed description.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze and interpret the data gathered through interviews. Interview transcripts were closely examined through multiple readings to grasp participants' lived experiences. To sketch the experiences and emotions related to schooling and language, initial coding was undertaken. These codes were sorted to develop broader themes that address the research questions. The common and diverse issues across participants' narratives were given special consideration. Special attention was paid to participants' expressions of ideas and perceptions. As Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

Goodson and Sikes (2001) state, silence, hesitation, and contradiction in the narratives are considered crucial, as they indicate tensions, loss, and open struggles. During analysis, the aim was not to reduce participants' stories to simply developing categories and meaning. Rather, it sought to keep them firmly rooted in participants' lived experiences. The analysis revolved around individual narratives and shared storytelling, aimed at reconciling the distinctive nature of an individual life with the commonalities that shaped it.

Result and Discussion

Results

Entering School: Language, Fear, and Silence

The participants' stories varied as they entered school, reflecting uncertainty, fear, and a strong sense of difference. The home and schools were perceived as totally different worlds. The medium of communication at home was their mother tongue, the Dhimal language, and they lived in their familiar social and cultural setting. On the contrary, school became a new setting in which the Nepali language, while teaching and learning activities remained predominant, shaped every interaction among Dhimal students within the community.

One participant, Sanjeev, has had difficulty speaking Nepali at school since the very beginning of the year. He responded, "I tried to speak Nepali, but the tongue would not move properly." Lekh reminded us of his school years and said that the Nepali language was a major challenge for him. According to him, "I found difficulties in understanding lessons and classroom participation was anxiety-inducing rather than building confidence."

Kedar was such a peer that language difficulties were closely associated with others' behavior. He remembered classmates making fun of his accent and pronunciation. Though he did not mention direct exclusion, such experiences made him reluctant to talk in class. And silence became a way of avoiding embarrassment. The

Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

participants repeatedly described feeling like outsiders in the classroom, even though they were physically present. At the same time, none of the participants reported any discrimination from teachers based on their ethnicity. Rather, their stories indicated a much more subtle experience. School was rarely aware of their language, cultural beliefs, and community knowledge. So, they had to learn to adapt to school expectations without expecting the school to adapt to them.

Finding Support and Purpose

Although schooling was new and challenging, the participants gradually found reasons to continue to participate. Early motivation came from external factors rather than personal interest, Kedar recalled. Sanjeev, too, said comparisons with children from other communities were so extreme that the pressure to continue school for comparison made him feel like he had to stay and go to school. School is not merely an academic domain but represents the community as a whole. Peers were crucial in reducing his fear of isolation and separation and in helping him overcome it more easily. The study revealed that students shared ideas and knowledge, notes, and combined their studies to understand the complex lessons. This showed that the interconnection, interdependence, and interaction among students help transform what they perceive as an unfamiliar place into a safe and convenient place and foster a sense of belonging. Teachers were further key sources of inspiration and support for the students' educational career pathways. For instance, one participant, Kedar, was particularly grateful to teachers, as they encouraged and motivated him academically rather than intimidating him, fostering confidence and making his educational journey more interesting. He contended that “teachers were not just instructors but people who can support and motivate the students’ potential.” However, motivation and excitement in the educational journey are not static but dynamic, changing over time. The study also found that parental pressure on the students became personal aspiration and a sense of community responsibility within Dhimel communities. In addition, very few Dhimel Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

had graduated from school, and higher education remained a huge source of inspiration and motivation for their education. Therefore, educational attainment among the Dhimal is not seen as merely a personal achievement but also as the fulfillment of family expectations and community emancipation.

Living with Economic Hardship

Economic and financial constraints are common factors for students as a whole throughout their educational experiences. Dhimal students, specifically, are also constrained by economic hardships, even in the early stages of the learning process. One participant named Sanjeev, for example, was worried about financial insecurity. He had a response like “since we lost family land, displaced by floods; we experienced extreme economic hardship, education was never affordable and assured.” He added, “Threats of failure were given when absent from school; how to go to school while basic needs were not fulfilled.” These students also faced critical challenges and practical problems in purchasing textbooks and instructional materials, paying examination fees, and managing household duties and responsibilities. Academic achievement largely depends on the household's economic context.

Family members, nevertheless, were committed to ensuring education despite financial challenges. One participant, named Lekh, said during the interview: “My father was supportive regarding my studies and made sacrifices for my future.” It was found that parents saw school and learning as insurance for a secure future, and similar narratives were found throughout. Social and economic support from family members, relatives, neighbors, and community members was also obtained during economic hardship and times of crisis, and they received emotional support, temporary shelter, and practical support for their needs at the same time. Students developed their own survival strategies after graduating from their studies. It was also found that students had already learned resilient strategies through failures and disappointments through educational processes. At the same time, some students work and study simultaneously Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

to continue their academic journey. In essence, the challenges of failure and difficulty are overcome by educational achievement, which usually leads to a sense of loss and failure during life's struggles, with the help of education at a broader level.

Success and Cultural Tensions

Educational achievement is closely tied to employment opportunities. The participants also completed their higher education and received employment opportunities. The employment opportunities are closely connected with financial security, social prestige, and power that were previously unavailable to many people within the Dhimel community. However, these produce emerging stresses. For instance, there were rapid transformations in language and culture within the family and the community. One participant's name was Lekh, and their response was: "Nepali language became the dominant language within the family; kids, even younger generations, used to speak Nepali rather than their mother language, Dhimel; there are huge shifts in language use and cultural practices in our family, even influencing our daily lives." Most importantly, they are proud of their identity as Dhimel, with their own language, costumes, heritage, and history. There are strong ties and bonds within the community. The narratives of participants, however, suggested that education remained crucial for ongoing processes of mobility within the Dhimel Community.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that the resilience of Dhimel students should not be understood merely as individual characteristics but rather as relational and inextricably interconnected with social, cultural, and ecological contexts. The narratives of participants highlight that educational achievement was notably shaped and facilitated not only by personal efforts but also by family support, social capital, and community relationships within the Dhimel community. Resilience is understood through sociological and ecological frameworks that interpret positive adaptation as a manifestation of relationships and resources rather than solely of personality (Ungar, Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

2011; Masten, 2014). Strikingly, language was seen as fundamental to the learning processes. The lived experiences of participants on early school experiences showed that linguistic differences impact both learning and social participation and belonging. Previous research has indicated that the experiences of indigenous learners in schools are linguistically and socially challenging environments in which dominant languages prevail (Phyak, 2013). The participants' fear and hesitation revealed that language is not only a tool for instruction but also a sense of inclusion and exclusion. The findings suggest the role of social networks and relationships in maintaining educational involvement. Family members, peers, and teachers were key to academic endeavors in schools. Research on resilience suggests that social networks, support, and relationships serve as protective factors in coping with adversity and challenges (Masten, 2014). Therefore, academic achievement is not a product of individual effort based on self-dedication alone but also of the networks of support, sacrifices, and motivation from both family and community.

The findings of the study also indicate that access to education is often constrained by financial constraints, poverty, and economic disadvantage in indigenous education, particularly in Nepal (Rai, 2017). Poverty is not a unique event or hurdle. It creates uncertainty, difficulties, and disruption in education. Nevertheless, the participants' narratives showed that educational persistence relied on the collective efforts of individual, family, and community networks and relations. The results are particularly relevant to social inclusion and access to equal educational opportunities. It was found that participants' experiences included indirect discrimination. Language, culture, and history were missing from school life. The exclusion of students is not only a matter of discrimination but also a matter of non-recognition within the Dhimel community. This study contends that the current discourse on indigenous education states that cultural absence can impact belonging, identity, and educational experience. Therefore, the findings showed a complex association between educational success and Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

cultural continuity. According to participants' life stories, educational mobility is often associated with adaptation to dominant linguistic and cultural norms. Education is crucial for cultural norms, but also causes the loss of the native Dhimel language. These tensions create discourse in indigenous education about inclusion and assimilation. However, educational success is not only about academic performance but also about cultural identity and continuity.

This study contends that the educational resilience of an indigenous community such as the Dhimel community is relational, culturally embedded, and driven by both opportunities and constraints. Resilience is not just about overcoming adversity but also about negotiating identity, maintaining a sense of belonging, and fostering opportunities through educational systems that often overlook the realities of indigenous communities. Finally, the study suggests that educational attainment should be assessed not only by academic performance but also by implications for cultural identity and continuity.

Conclusion and Implications

The article illuminates that educational resilience among Dhimel students is not merely the product of individual struggle and instantaneous but reproduced through the constant negotiation, adaptation, and social support embedded within social, cultural, and economic contexts. Students within the Dhimel community experienced double alienation in school as language, culture, and knowledge were unacknowledged. Educational achievement remained crucial for mobility and resilience, even as they lived in poverty, displacement, and hazardous conditions. The study demonstrated that the school itself was not a neutral institution. Students possessed linguistic and cultural characteristics from home but were rarely acknowledged in formal education. The predominance of the Nepali language in schools and classrooms posed challenges to students' participation, confidence, and sense of belonging. Parents, peers, relatives, teachers, and the community provide emotional and financial support in times of crisis.

Subedi (2026). Navigating Double Alienation . . .

Eventually, students also developed their own survival strategies by using educational attainment and also treated failure and challenges as learning opportunities. The study also explored the tensions between educational opportunities and cultural continuity, highlighting the educational and cultural mobility of the Dhimel community while raising concerns about the extinction of language, culture, and historical and cultural practices. Therefore, mobility within the Dhimel community is characterized by continuous negotiation between community involvement in predominant educational structures and existing cultural identity and community life.

In essence, the educational resilience of Dhimel students is relational and embedded within social, economic, and cultural contexts. Understanding resilience is not simply about overcoming adversity but also about negotiating identities and belonging and creating space through education. There is still a lack of cultural sensitivity in recognizing indigenous languages and knowledge in both educational policy and practice, and in teaching and learning processes at the classroom and school levels. Indigenous languages and culture should be recognized and valued in the school curriculum so that students can relate local knowledge and languages to school and promote meaningful and inclusive education.

This study underscores the urgent need for additional economic and institutional support, such as school meals, scholarships, and emergency practical needs, which is imperative for students from indigenous communities like Dhimel in times of uncertainty and for reducing the risk of economic vulnerability. Teacher training programs should be further developed to prepare teachers to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, so they use culturally sensitive teaching methods to provide continuous support and motivation for students.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares no conflict of interest.

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