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Pedagogical Strategies of Secondary Social Studies Classroom from Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of diverse pedagogical strategies by secondary-level Social Studies teachers to actively engage students, achieve curriculum objectives, and address the needs of learners from varied cultural and social backgrounds. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research centers on the lived experiences of four teachers, two from rural schools and two from urban schools through interviews and classroom observations. Findings reveal that teachers integrate student-centered, behaviorist, and cognitive approaches in their instruction. Group discussions, reflective activities, and real-life examples are employed to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and responsible civic behavior. Lessons are further enriched through local cultural and historical references, enhancing the relevance and meaning of the content for students. Despite challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching resources, insufficient ICT facilities, and syllabus pressures, teachers demonstrate creativity, commitment, and reflective practice to promote active learning and civic awareness. The study highlights the importance of practical teaching strategies, adequate resources, and professional development opportunities in strengthening Social Studies education, ultimately supporting the cultivation of informed, responsible, and engaged citizens in Nepal.

Keywords: Socio-cultural learning, student engagement, teaching challenges, teachers' experiences

Introduction

Social Studies education plays a pivotal role in shaping informed, responsible, and active citizens who can engage thoughtfully with the complexities of modern society. At the secondary level, Social Studies encompasses a range of disciplines including history, geography, civics, economics, and political science each contributing to students' understanding of social structures, cultural diversity, and civic responsibility (NCSS, 2010). As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and socially dynamic, there is a growing demand for pedagogical approaches that go beyond rote memorization and textbook-centered instruction (Wright, 2018). Effective teaching in Social Studies requires the use of diverse and dynamic pedagogical strategies that promote

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critical thinking, participatory learning, and real-world application. These strategies may include inquiry-based learning, simulations, debates, project-based learning, and the integration of digital tools (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). However, the successful implementation of such approaches depends heavily on teachers' professional judgment, contextual understanding, and instructional flexibility.

Teacher educators, who are responsible for preparing future Social Studies teachers, play a crucial role in shaping the pedagogical beliefs and practices of pre-service educators (Zeichner, 2012). Their insights, grounded in both theoretical knowledge and practical classroom experience, offer valuable perspectives on what constitutes effective Social Studies instruction. By focusing on the voices of teacher educators, this research aims to uncover not only the strategies they employ but also the values, experiences, and challenges that inform their teaching practices. Ultimately, this inquiry seeks to contribute to the discourse on Social Studies teacher education by highlighting the pedagogical approaches endorsed by experienced teacher educators. The findings may offer insights for improving pre-service teacher training, fostering reflective teaching, and enhancing the quality of Social Studies instruction in secondary schools.

In Nepal, Social Studies at the secondary level is particularly important for developing civic awareness, social responsibility, and respect for cultural diversity. However, the effectiveness of Social Studies education largely depends on the pedagogical approaches employed by teachers. While interactive, student-centered methods enhance learning and engagement, traditional or outdated methods often limit students' growth and critical understanding. Despite its importance, little is known about how secondary-level Social Studies teachers in Nepal experience and interpret their teaching practices, navigate challenges, and respond to the evolving needs of their students. Understanding these lived experiences is essential to inform meaningful improvements in pedagogy and curriculum implementation. The main purpose of this study is to explore secondary-level Social Studies teachers' experiences with pedagogical strategies to enhance student engagement.

Literature Review

This section provides the groundwork for the study by exploring existing knowledge, theories, and research, connecting the study to a broader academic context. It highlights how teaching strategies, teacher experiences, and classroom environments influence students' overall development and civic awareness. Drawing on both local and international studies, particularly in Nepal, the review weaves together theoretical frameworks and empirical research, identifying gaps the study seeks to address and showing the researcher's deep understanding of the topic.

The study found that secondary level Social Studies teachers held varied views on content, teaching methods, and resources, often distrusted textbooks, and noted discrepancies between professional historians' work and school-taught history (Yilmaz, 2020). The study found that secondary Social Studies education faces challenges such as outdated curricula, traditional teaching methods, and limited resources, and it recommends updating the curriculum, using technology, improving teacher training, and implementing interactive, project-based learning (Shrestha et al., 2025). Teaching Social Studies is a complex task, requiring teachers not only to have strong knowledge of the subject but also to master effective teaching skills and truly understand the needs of their students (Powell, 2017). Teacher educators play a crucial role in shaping and guiding the next generation of Social Studies teachers through effective training and mentorship (Sobradil et al., 2020). Jones and Saye (2017) emphasize that teacher educators play a

key role in passing on effective teaching methods while adapting them to address emerging challenges. The studies highlight that Social Studies teaching is shaped by teachers' beliefs, the resources available, and the methods they use in the classroom. Many teachers face challenges like outdated curricula, limited materials, and traditional approaches, which can make it difficult to fully engage students. Effective teaching in Social Studies requires both strong subject knowledge and practical skills, along with an understanding of students' needs. Teacher educators play a key role by mentoring future teachers and encouraging flexible, innovative methods that make learning more meaningful and impactful.

The study examines how secondary Social Studies teachers integrate current events, detailing their strategies, challenges, and recommendations to make lessons more engaging, reflecting teachers' perspectives on enhancing classroom practice (Dhakai, 2021). The study examines current teaching practices in Social Studies and emphasizes the value of student-centered, constructivist approaches. It draws on classroom observations, highlights teacher behaviors, and explores obstacles to change, offering insights for improving both theory and practice in pedagogy (Shah, 2019). The study investigates teachers' perspectives on teaching and professional development, analyzing the influence of policies, training, and school conditions on their readiness and capacity to adopt new teaching methods, highlighting both practitioner insights and systemic challenges (Acharya, 2025). This study looks at practical programmes and intervention models designed to make school teaching more relevant and skill-oriented. It offers recommendations for Social Studies teachers to create lessons that are hands-on, engaging, and focused on civic understanding, showing how classroom strategies connect to larger educational initiatives (Devkota & Basyal, 2024). The reviewed literature examines how Social Studies teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and experiences shape their teaching. It shows that these perspectives influence classroom methods, making lessons engaging and meaningful. Teachers use strategies like integrating current events, student-centered approaches, and real-life connections, guided by their expertise, training, and policies. Despite challenges such as limited resources, they show creativity and commitment. The findings highlight the need for ongoing professional development, supportive policies, and innovative strategies to boost students' civic awareness and critical thinking.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on two key learning theories to better understand how students learn and how teachers support that process. The behaviorist learning theory, as proposed by Skinner (1953), emphasizes that students learn effectively through repetition, practice, and reinforcement, showing how consistent feedback and rewards can guide and shape positive behaviors. In contrast, the cognitive learning theory, developed through the work of Piaget (1970) and Bruner (1966), highlights the mental processes learners use to think, understand, and make sense of information. By combining insights from both approaches, this study explores how teachers implement behaviorist and cognitive strategies in the classroom to boost student engagement, motivation, and overall learning.

Behaviorist Theory

B.F. Skinner explains that learning happens when people respond to what is happening around them, especially through rewards or punishments (Woolfolk, 2019). Simply put, we learn by repeating behaviors that bring positive results and avoiding those that bring negative ones. In the classroom, this looks like giving clear instructions, practising skills regularly, and offering

feedback or rewards when students do well like praise, stickers, or other incentives. While modern teaching does not rely solely on behaviorist methods, these ideas are still very useful. Positive reinforcement encourages good behavior, and clear rules help create a safe, focused environment where students understand what's expected and feel motivated to succeed. In essence, behaviorist principles continue to help teacher's guide and shape student behavior through practice, encouragement, and consistency.

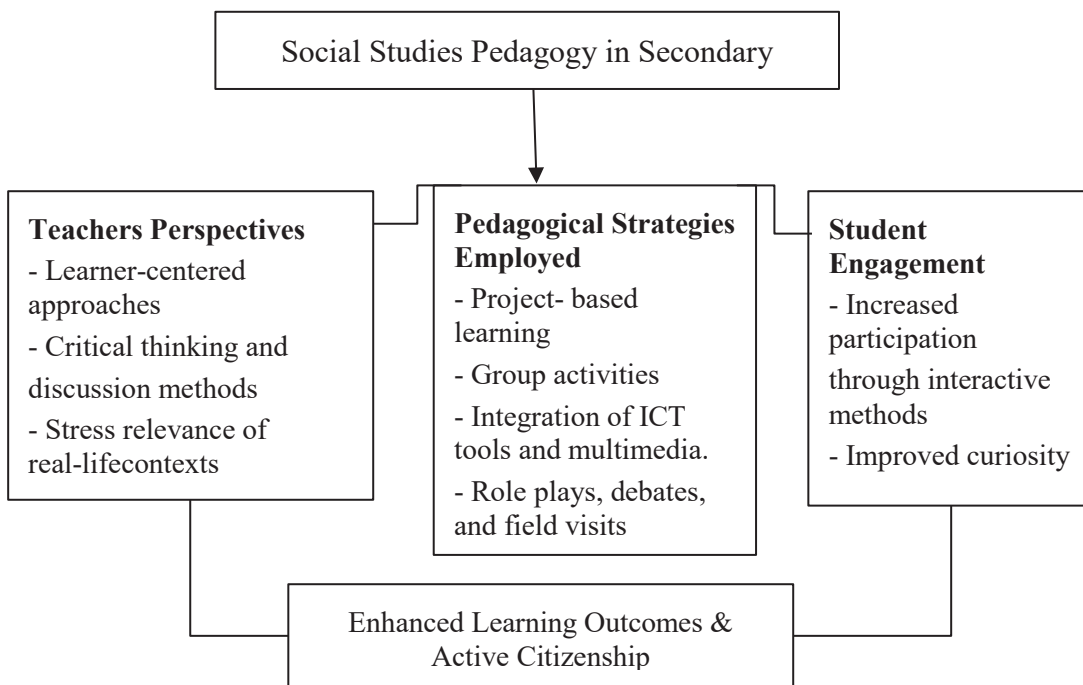
Cognitive Learning Theory

Cognitive learning theory explores learners' learning processes, understanding, and remembering new information (Woolfolk, 2019). The theory emphasizes the mental processes involved in learning, focusing on understanding concepts deeply and forming meaningful connections with existing knowledge instead of relying on rote memorization (Ormrod, 2020). Teachers can use strategies like charts and mind maps to help students organize ideas, connect concepts, and improve memory retention (Mayer, 2011). Scaffolding is another effective method, where teachers initially provide guidance and gradually reduce support as students become more confident and capable (Wood et al., 1976). Additionally, cognitive learning theory encourages metacognition, teaching students to reflect on their thinking, plan their learning, and monitor their progress, which promotes independence and more effective learning (Flavell, 1979). Cognitive learning theory reminds us that teaching is not just about delivering facts. It is about nurturing thinking, understanding, and meaningful connections. By integrating strategies that engage students' minds, teachers can empower learners to become active, reflective, and capable thinkers who are prepared to apply knowledge beyond the classroom.

Conceptual Framework

In secondary-level education, the way teachers choose and use teaching strategies has a strong impact on students learning and engagement especially in Social Studies, where thinking critically, participating actively, and connecting lessons to real-life issues are very important. This study is based on the idea that teachers' real experiences in the classroom can give deep insights into how different teaching methods work, what makes them effective, and what challenges teachers face. It focuses on how teachers design, adjust, and reflect on their teaching practices to make learning meaningful and engaging for students.

The framework views the teacher as an active decision-maker who shapes classroom practices based on their professional values, the school context, and ongoing reflection on their teaching.



The conceptual framework shows that teaching is a continuous and thoughtful process. Teacher educators make teaching choices based on their experiences, classroom situations, and constant learning. It explains that successful student engagement in Social Studies does not depend on one fixed method. Instead, it comes from the connection between teachers' beliefs, their teaching strategies, and the classroom's social and cultural context. By sharing their stories, teacher educators reveal practical knowledge and real-life experiences that guide their teaching methods. These insights help improve educational practice and teacher development.

Methods and Procedures

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of secondary-level Social Studies teachers in Nepal. Phenomenology focuses on individual's experience, interprets, and gives meaning to their personal and professional lives within a particular context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Moustakas (1994), the study emphasizes understanding the meaning and essence of teaching as described by those who have actually lived it. Through this lens, the research aims to uncover the essence of teachers' experiences, including their challenges, perceptions, and classroom realities in teaching Social Studies. The researcher carefully explored the participants' experiences to understand their true essence. By setting aside personal biases, the focus remained on what the participants themselves described, uncovering the heart of their perspectives in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This process began by identifying significant statements from the data, which were then grouped into meaningful themes. From these themes, detailed textual and structural descriptions were developed. Finally, these descriptions were brought together to uncover the core essence of how Social Studies teaching is experienced in the real-life contexts of both rural and urban schools.

This study involved four teachers, two from rural and two from urban schools chosen to reflect different educational settings. Participants were given pseudonyms (Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D) to protect their identities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews captured teachers' reflections on teaching strategies and challenges, while observations showed actual activities in the classroom. Ethical principles were carefully followed throughout the study. All participants gave their informed consent, participated voluntarily, and their confidentiality was fully protected. These measures created an atmosphere of trust and openness, allowing teachers to share genuine and heartfelt reflections on their real experiences in Social Studies classrooms.

Results and Discussion

This section explores the real experiences of four secondary Social Studies teachers. This study focused on the pedagogical strategies of secondary level Social Studies teachers to make lesson meaningful and relatable through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. It also examines challenges they face, such as limited resources, large classes, and varying student interest, while capturing their motivations, values, and reflections. Overall, this section emphasizes the lived experiences of teachers, showing how theory and practice intersect in everyday classroom life, and highlights the strategies they use to engage students actively while addressing both behavioral and cognitive aspects of learning.

Linking Social Studies to Real-Life Situation

Social Studies goes beyond history, geography, and civics. It helps us understand the world and the people around us. When students connect what they learn in class to their everyday lives, learning becomes meaningful and memorable. Seeing how local decisions affect their own community or noticing cultural diversity in festivals and neighbors helps them think critically, solve problems, and feel responsible toward society. Linking Social Studies to real life not only builds knowledge but also shapes informed, caring, and active citizens.

This study explored the pedagogical strategies used by teachers to promote active participation. The narratives of teachers reflect linking classroom learning to real-life contexts in social studies curriculum. The participant teacher A, who is a teacher in rural village reflected:

When I teach about sustainable development, I like to relate it to our daily life. I tell my students that we should start with our own community. For example, when we build a road, I explain how we need to protect our environment. If we cut down one tree, we should plant more trees to keep our surroundings green and pollution-free.

The participant's teaching combines behaviorist and cognitive approaches. Behaviorally, students learn through real actions and reinforcement, such as planting trees to practice sustainability, which builds positive habits. Cognitively, the teacher connects lessons to real-life community experiences, encouraging deep thinking, meaningful understanding, and problem-solving skills. The teacher B, also from a rural background, she shared:

If I am discussing the child right in the classroom. I tell my students every child has the right to go to school, to play, and to share their thoughts. I share real stories from our community, like children who had to work instead of going to school, and we discuss together what could have been done to help them. We also talk about how they can support their friends in enjoying these rights.

This participant's approach blends behaviorist and cognitive learning methods, promoting positive habits and social responsibility through reinforcement and real-life examples, while also encouraging deep thinking, analysis, and application of knowledge through discussions and community stories. This combination fosters both behavioral growth and the development of empathy and critical thinking, making learning practical and meaningful.

Teacher C, from an urban school, shared his classroom strategies, emphasizing the importance of teaching students about their rights as human beings. He explained that students find learning about consumer rights especially engaging:

I bring small items from the market and show the children how to check the expiry date, price, and quality. I tell them, 'If someone tries to cheat you, you have the right to speak up. You deserve what you pay for.' The students also love sharing their own experiences, like buying snacks or school supplies. Together, we discuss how to be careful and smart consumers.

This participant integrates behaviorist and cognitive approaches by promoting responsible habits through practice and reinforcement, while also encouraging critical thinking and connecting lessons to real-life experiences. This method helps students develop practical skills and a deeper, meaningful understanding of consumer rights. According to Teacher D, "I teach children about unity in diversity then, I tell them people in our community speak different languages, follow different traditions, and celebrate various festivals, we all live together, help one another, and share happiness". Again she shared:

I encourage students to share their own experiences of playing or working with friends who are different from them. I also organize group activities where they must collaborate, so they can experience firsthand how differences can be respected and harmony can be built.

This participant integrates behaviorist and cognitive approaches in her teaching. She promotes positive social behaviors like cooperation and sharing through structured group activities while also encouraging reflection and connections to real-life experiences. This blend helps students internalize good habits, develop critical thinking, and cultivate empathy, preparing them to engage respectfully with a diverse community.

The classroom observations reveal that effective Social Studies teaching goes beyond content delivery, connecting learning to students' daily lives and communities. Teachers blended behaviorist approaches encouraging repeated actions, habits, and reinforcement with cognitive strategies that foster critical thinking, reflection, and real-life application. Examples included environmental projects, discussions on rights, and practical activities on consumer behavior. This combination helped students develop practical skills, social awareness, empathy, and problem-solving abilities. Overall, linking lessons to real-life experiences and using both approaches makes learning meaningful, shaping students into informed, engaged, and responsible citizens.

Challenges Faced by Teachers for Interactive Classrooms

Creating an interactive classroom is very important for effective Social Studies teaching. It helps students take part in learning by sharing ideas, asking questions, and connecting lessons with their daily lives. However, many teachers find it difficult to make their classes truly interactive. Problems like large class sizes, limited teaching materials, lack of training, and limited time make it hard to involve every student. Understanding these challenges is the first step to

finding practical ways to make Social Studies classes more engaging, inclusive, and student-centered. As shared by Teacher A during the interview,

I always try to make my lessons more interesting, but we do not have enough materials. I only have a few simple things like maps and charts. It is difficult for students to imagine what I explain because we never go on field trips, and I do not have proper ICT tools to make learning more engaging.

Moreover, she explained her experience, "we often have to finish many chapters in a very short period, which can feel quite overwhelming. Because of this time pressure, I sometimes have to skip discussions or activities that I know would help students understand the lessons better". This participant's experiences reveal the real struggles of teaching Social Studies in a classroom with limited resources and tight schedules. From a behaviorist perspective, the lack of materials and hands-on experiences makes it hard for students to practice and internalize what they learn. At the same time, cognitive learning shows that when discussions and reflective activities are skipped, students miss chances to connect new knowledge to their own experiences and think critically. Teacher B, reflecting on their classroom experiences, "our school does not have a projector or access to the internet. If we had these facilities, we could use videos, pictures, and other digital tools to make our lessons more interesting and engaging for students." Furthermore, he shared, "because of the lack of such resources, teaching mostly relies on lectures, where students only listen, which makes it harder for them to understand and enjoy the lessons". The participant's experiences show that effective learning depends not just on teaching methods but also on the resources available in the classroom. With limited tools, lessons often rely on lectures, which makes it harder for students to actively practice, reinforce, and internalize concepts a challenge highlighted by behaviorist theory. At the same time, without engaging materials or multimedia, students struggle to process and connect new information meaningfully, as cognitive theory emphasizes.

Teachers in urban schools pointed out that having very large classes makes it difficult for them to give attention to each student. Because there are so many students in one classroom, it becomes challenging to involve everyone in interactive activities, discussions, or group work. As a result, some students may not get enough chance to share their ideas or participate actively in lessons. Based on Teacher C's experience, "I have more than 30 students in classes, which makes it challenging to engage every student in learning activities. When I ask questions, only a few students sitting in the front rows respond, while most of the others stay silent". He added, "some students think Social Studies is less important than subjects like Science or Math, and this mindset often makes them less interested in participating. We try to make the lessons engaging and lively, but keeping their motivation high can be a real challenge".

The participants' experiences highlight the difficulty of engaging large Social Studies classes, especially when students see the subject as less important. Behaviorist insights show that students farther from the teacher participate less, suggesting reinforcement like feedback or rewards is not reaching all. Cognitive perspectives indicate low interest may result from lessons not connecting to prior knowledge or real-life experiences. Using behaviorist strategies to increase participation alongside cognitive methods to deepen understanding can create a more inclusive and motivating classroom. Another Urban area teacher D also faces overcrowded classroom and explain, "group work and debates are really useful, but managing them in an overcrowded classroom is challenging. Students get distracted easily, and it takes a lot of effort to keep them

focused and maintain discipline". Again, she shared, "I know interactive activities are more effective. But we are always under pressure to finish the syllabus before exams, so I have to go back to traditional lecture methods". The participant's experience highlights the challenge of balancing classroom management and meaningful learning. Overcrowded classes make discipline and individual attention difficult, limiting reinforcement and active participation. Yet, the participant values group work and discussion, promoting knowledge construction. Time pressures for syllabus completion often force lectures, reducing deeper learning opportunities. Overall, the experience underscores the need to combine behaviorist strategies for structure with cognitive approaches for engagement.

Classroom observations in both rural and urban schools revealed that Social Studies teaching faces significant challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and pressure to complete the syllabus. While teachers attempted discussions, group work, and interactive activities, lessons were mostly lecture-based, with only a few students actively participating. Visual aids were used occasionally, but lack of ICT and hands-on materials limited experiential learning. From a behaviorist perspective, limited reinforcement reduced student motivation, while from a cognitive perspective, lack of reflection and real-life connections hindered deeper understanding. Despite teachers' awareness of student-centered learning, practical constraints such as large classes, insufficient materials, and an exam-focused system, prevent full implementation. Improved resources, smaller classes, and professional support, along with a mix of behaviorist and cognitive strategies, are needed to make Social Studies classrooms more engaging and effective.

Conclusion

Social Studies teachers strive to make learning meaningful and engage by using a variety of interactive teaching methods. Techniques such as group discussions, collaborative projects, and open-ended questioning allow students to actively participate in the learning process rather than passively receive information. By connecting lessons to students' local culture, traditions, and everyday experiences, teachers help learners grasp complex concepts more easily. This approach not only promotes critical thinking but also nurtures empathy, civic awareness, and an understanding of social responsibilities, enabling students to relate classroom knowledge to real-life situations.

However, many challenges, particularly in rural areas, hinder the effective implementation of these strategies. Teachers frequently face overcrowded classrooms, limited access to teaching materials, outdated resources, and a shortage of digital tools. These constraints reduce opportunities for interactive learning and make it difficult to adopt student-centered teaching methods, limiting students' ability to engage fully with the subject matter.

Despite these obstacles, Social Studies remains a vital subject for fostering informed, responsible, and socially conscious citizens. Effective teaching in this context involves a careful blend of strategies that combine active practice, reinforcement of knowledge, reflective thinking, and problem-solving activities. Such an approach allows students to build both cognitive understanding and social awareness, preparing them to navigate complex societal issues thoughtfully.

The study highlights the need for improved teaching resources, professional development for educators, smaller class sizes, and supportive educational policies. By linking lessons to students' lived experiences and employing a mix of pedagogical strategies, Social Studies can

cultivate engaged, thoughtful, and socially aware learners. These insights provide valuable guidance for enhancing teaching practices and educational outcomes in Nepal.

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