


**Original Article**

**Learning Goes Beyond School: A Case Study**

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**Abstract**

Through the life history approach of research, biographical details, direct observations and interviews with a person, the article justifies that learning is not limited to formal settings. Knowledge, skills, or attitudes are acquired in unstructured, spontaneous, and non-curriculum-based contexts. It is not only the formal education institutions that provide education; it is also the society, the family, the circumstances, and many other factors that enhance and aid the learning process. Experiential and informal learning theories apply to a person's learning process. The article exemplifies education as a lived, nonlinear process - shaped by poverty, mentorship, and self-reinvention. The article suggests that knowledge and learning should not be attested only by degrees and diplomas awarded to only those who attend schools and colleges. It challenges policymakers to legitimize informal learning, confront caste-based exclusion, and center indigenous knowledge in heritage economies.

**Keywords:** experiential learning, informal learning, wood carving, Bhaktapur, Newar

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## Introduction

Learning is a continuous and dynamic process. It can occur inside schools, colleges, communities, workplaces, and families (Bentley, 1998, p. 75). It extends beyond the boundaries of formal education. Learning can take place in any situation and at any time. Mostly learning is shaped by their socio-cultural environment, personal experiences, and community interactions. We see many people who have ample experience and expertise in their fields. However, they do not have any formal education or may not have any higher academic degrees, yet they are leading successful lives in their respective fields.

*Parera janne* and *padhera janne* are the two terms in Nepali. The first term *parera janne* indicates experiential learning by a non-literate person, while the second term *padhera janne* means bookish learning – often regarded as literate. Experiential learning is a holistic philosophy of education based on the notion that an individual's life experiences, education, and work play a central role in their learning and understanding of new knowledge (Fry et al., 2009; Kolb & Kolb, 2009, as cited in Bartle, 2015).

In 1971, Illich published *Deschooling Society*, a critical look at the troubles of modern schooling. His book advocated radical changes in the education system, including disestablishing traditional schools and developing more informal "learning webs." Illich (1971) claimed that most learning happens informally, and institutionalized schooling hinders authentic learning. Further, he indicated that the ideal education "system" allows people to choose what they learn and when they learn. Neither learning nor justice is promoted by schooling because educators insist on packaged instruction with certification. Learning and assigning social roles are melted into schooling (Illich, 1970). Generally, educated people are so enthralled by traditional and prescriptive teaching that they are not ready to think beyond that. It is time to free them from outdated system and help them see learning in a new way.

Illich quickly pointed out that people learn more from their daily experiences than in a classroom. As Illich (1970) stated, schools wrongly assume teaching causes most learning, while people actually learn more outside school, which often just confines students, especially in wealthier countries (p. 7). My experience also tells me that most learning happens informally and spontaneously, even most deliberate learning does not

result from programmed coaching. Students may acquire certain knowledge by attending six hours a day inside a classroom. What greater learning opportunities might arise if they used their time reading, having intense discussions, or productive endeavors?

In this context, this paper analyzes a person from Bhaktapur using an ethnographic research method. I have applied life history approach, which examines learning through personal narratives and lived experiences. It offers a rich framework to explore how knowledge is acquired outside formal institutions. For this ethnographic study, I have selected the case of Mahila Kusi (name changed) (61), a male from a low-income family in the local farming community of Bhaktapur. He has not received any academic degree certificate from any university but has gained expertise in his field. Based on the interaction processes and discussion notes, I have studied his learning process and success. Thus, this paper analyzes the information from the perspective of learning and success. Finally, I conclude the paper with narration, analysis, and theorization.

### **Life History Approach**

Geiger (1986) state that life history approach is a form of biographical writing in which the researcher reports an extensive record of a person's life as told to the researcher (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2017). Thus, the individual being studied is alive, and life as lived in the present is influenced by personal, institutional, and social histories (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Mahila's story is not merely his own; it is a representation of the society in which he lives. His identity is not simply a product of what he remembers, but also of what he forgets, ignores, or suppresses. The act of storytelling is a process of remembering. If one doesn't tell his/her story, history will not carry it or the story is forgotten. This is the process of shaping the history.

As Kuhn (1995) argues that by recounting our past, we construct our sense of self. These identity narratives rely on memory but are equally formed by omissions—what we forget or repress—as much as by what we choose to tell.

### **Case Introduction**

In this life history research, I have brought a case of a person from a community of farmers in Bhaktapur, a historic and cultural city of Nepal. An in-depth understanding

of his life trajectories from his perspective was recorded in the study. This case was selected from among poor households. It involved collecting detailed accounts of lived experiences, personal narratives, memories, and reflections of individuals or groups across various time frames (Stewart, n.d). Mahila Kusi has traveled a long way and faced adverse circumstances. He has no academic degree but is no less than an expert in his field. He dropped out of school in class 6 and tasted a variety of life experiences. Those experiences were part of his learning.

Mahila learned wood carving, one of the traditional occupations of Sikami or Shilpakars of Bhaktapur, though it was not his family's occupation. He has been running a workshop and exporting the products. He has trained hundreds of youth in woodcarving, and either the trainees start their businesses or work in his industry.

### **Processes and Methods**

In this study, in addition to my direct observation, several rounds of interviews and interactions were conducted with Mahila, aiming to gather his views on learning. Semi-structured or open-ended interviews allowed the participant to express his experiences openly and in detail. The artistic structures and buildings adorned with fine woodcarvings he created stand as evidence of Mahila's life history. Written sources such as notes, letters of appreciations (Samman Patras) that Mahila obtained, logbooks of the calculations (*Hisbkitab*) he made, his training manuals and diaries provided valuable insights into his life history. They offered a chronological account of Mahila's life and experiences.

Further, an analysis was done on how life experiences help in learning and why he is no less than an engineer while constructing and renovating the temples and residential buildings.

I live near his residence. Therefore, I have known him for more than two decades personally. My spouse's maternal house was constructed with his splendid and beautiful woodcarvings. I have known him as an actor of traditional dances and plays since my childhood. There used to be public plays at the time of the Gaijatra Festival in Bhaktapur. This has enabled me interact quickly and explore more about him. Further, this previous information and knowledge have made it possible to explore his growing individual being and cultural conditions in-depth from an insider's perspective. In order

to improve the reliability and validity of the information, rigorous interactions were done in different settings to cross-check the information and avoid inconsistencies.

I interviewed him during the Dashain vacation (a festival in September-October, 2023) when he was overwhelmed with making dozens of orders of woodcarvings from in and around Bhaktapur. His workshop was running full-fledged while other small local industries were closed. The sound of the sawmill cutting the wood and the continuous sound of the hammers on the chisel to scoop and make artful structures on the plain or rough pieces of wood made a different environment to interview. He frequently suggested that the workers and learners make the artifacts while I was recording his interview. Many telephone calls seemed to be disturbing. The clients and the official staff did not hesitate to interrupt our interview, as it is considered our culturally accepted right.

We had further sittings on May-June 2024 for member checking to ensure that the collected data accurately reflects the respondent's perspectives, experiences, and responses and to increase the credibility and reliability of the data. I shared transcripts, summaries, or interpretations of the data with the respondent to confirm, clarify, or correct the information. It helped to align the findings with their intended meanings. I met Mahila in his birthplace at Suryamadhi Tole in the evening on December 14, 2024, before the final touch on this article. He was busy preparing for the Bansuri Baja Pratiyogita (Flute Competition) organized by Bhaktapur Municipality Council on the occasion of Bhaktapur Festival-2024. His house has been converted into an *Akhalaya* (School of music and dance) and he was acting as a coach of the archestra. Mahila managed to talk with me for an hour.

### **Presentation, Interpretation, and Analysis**

#### **Mahila's Childhood and Upbringing**

Education begins from the very first days of a child's life within the family. Parents and the entire family are primary guides and supporters in their children's learning process. As a key influence, this role is undeniably fundamental, significantly shaping the overall development and formation of the human personality. Mahila is not an exception.

Mahila is the second male child of Manglal, a poor father struggling to survive and provide for his four children. Manglal worked day and night on his small plot of land or as a wage earner to solve the hand-to-mouth problem. Manglal knew that being illiterate meant facing hardship in life. The Sahujis, the rich and dominating people in society, often cheated him. However, in his later days, he learned to read and used to chant Hindu mythological books like Chanakya. He was very fond of listening to the Bhajan and chanting it repeatedly every evening in the open places of the locality. Though Manglal was not able to go to school, he was very good at farming. He was skillful in making houses. He used to go to work as a mason when he had leisure time in his farming work. At times, he was a monitor of the masons. Mahilia's mother strongly supported her husband in his struggle to exist. Though illiterate, she had a good knowledge of weaving cloth by herself, and she used to train the ladies informally in the locality. She was among the three very skillful women in weaving in the locality. In those days, having the skill to weave clothes was one of the primary qualifications for getting married. She used to help solve the local women's day-to-day problems. Mahila recalls:

*My mother used to rise early at 2 a.m., about a month before any major festivals like Dashain (a festival that lies in September or October of a year) and Bisket (a festival that is celebrated in the new year), to make enough clothes for the whole family. She worked till late at night. I think this had something to do with the later period of my life to do hard work. I think my family was the foundation of my knowledge and skills.*

Homemade cotton cloths were considered very comfortable and easy for working people in winter and summer. "We used to be very happy to get new pieces of cloth for the festivals." Mahila also tried to learn to weave cloths. It was just like having the experience. Doing and learning go hand in hand. One gets excited when one gets something done. Experience and learning would appear to be almost inseparable. Kolb (2015) fits well with this idea, as he explained: 'Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (p. 49).

Usually, Mahila's parents went to the field and returned home late at night. The children had to cook meals for the family. Often, his elder sister used to cook food, but Mahila had to help his sister. He might help fetch water from the well or wash

vegetables. Sometimes, his sister let him do all the tasks when she had to do other household work. This shows that learning is boundaryless: it can occur anywhere and everywhere. This makes learning fun when there is no definite syllabus, no timetable, and no stress for learning new things. Daily experience is part of a lifelong process in a natural way. Informal learning occurs in various settings such as playgrounds, workshops, farmer's fields, feasts and festivals, jatra, and mela (religious fairs). These environments facilitate certain types of learning and often serve as sources of entertainment.

### **School-Age**

Mahila does not remember when he got admitted to the school. He recalls with difficulty that he went to school at the age of not less than seven years. One could not expect the classroom to be like the students found today: no desk and bench. Brick was the bench, and the slate board was the writing desk. In a dusty room, only a blackboard hung on the wall with no roof, even if it did it would be a leaky one. Students used to get a holiday if it rained. There were only one or two girls in a class of 40 students. Mahila recalled that girls weren't encouraged to attend school and learn formal education then.

### **Economy - The Determining Factor**

The economy determines everything. He wasn't fortunate enough to get a quality bag for school. His father made him a school bag made of Bora, a sack of chemical fertilizer. It was so hard to buy even a copybook and a pencil. Mahila adds, "*Many times, I did not get a belly-full meal. Having a meal of rice and vegetables was rare. Rice would be the dish reserved only for special occasions like festivals.*" The same was the condition for almost all the peasant families in Bhaktapur.

People were impoverished. The farmers suffered a lot as the production was not so good. Mahila's parents could not pay a loan of 5 thousand rupees for decades. Marx (1844) identifies two categories of human drives and desires: the constant or inherent ones—like hunger and sexual desire—rooted in human nature. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, he notes that the modern economy has created a new, artificial need: the need for money (as cited in Fromm, 1961). The economic condition always haunted Mahila to earn money from his childhood. That led him to learn skills and earn enough money to survive.

## Away From School

Mahila was studying in class 6. He was about 13 years old. There was a turning point at the same age. He left the school. That wasn't because he was not interested in learning in the school. He got a severe corporal punishment in the school. He got threatened by one of his classmate's uncles. Mahila had a dispute with a friend in his classroom. The cause was simple. The friend threw Mahila's book, and in return, Mahila slapped him. Mahila couldn't resist hitting the friend with a small piece of brick which cut the friend's head. One of the teachers called both of them, but only Mahila got a serious punishment with inhuman beating. Mahila was helpless. He felt very humiliated. He could not control himself from running away from the school. The story doesn't end. One of the maternal uncles of the boy threatened him with a beating. He was so scared that he stopped attending school and making different pretenses. He went far away from the city and stayed the whole day doing nothing. Sometimes, he got friends to go fishing in the nearby river, or he went swimming. Mahila's case resembles what Bauer et al. (1990) found about corporal punishment. He concluded that there was more research to show that corporal punishment didn't provide any significant advantages in a school setting (Peterson, 2014). Mahila is one of the examples of it and remembers those days by saying, *"I was lost. I didn't know what happened to me."*

The school teachers called him to rejoin the school just after three months of his absence. He might have been rescued had he been invited before but he had already developed the habit of enjoying out of school. The world without being monitored is exciting because one can do whatever he/she likes. Mahila does not remember when he got admitted to the school.

## Learning Beyond the School

Children learn through play. While not all lessons learned are positive, the learning process is undeniably present. Mahila learned many games and sports in his childhood. He was sharp at hitting marbles. *Aspas*, *Telkasa*, *Wonwa Thonwa*, *Dugukasa*, *Bakocha*, and *Hwagra Kasa* were some of the local games in those days. When he was 8 or 9, he played *Chakki*, made from a cigarette box. Mahila proudly says,

*I won so much Chakki that I couldn't find enough space in 3 big sacs. My friends were afraid to compete with me. I rose early at 4 a.m., even in winter, to reserve the best place to play. We used to wait for the sun to rise to start playing, which*



*continued till the morning mealtime. Again, after meal and Khaja (tiffin or midday snacks), our journey in the world of sports continued.*

Winter was the best time to play because everybody had leisure. Students got a vacation, there was less work to do in the field and there was no rain.

Generally, parents do not bother with their children's playing, no matter how long or whichever game they play. They feel relaxed if they aren't disturbed while working. So, children can play as they like. *"I became like a stray dog! I didn't have to go to school. Today, I feel ashamed to tell you what I did in those days. I even used to steal money from my father's pocket."* Mahila remembers those days as dark and oppressive. However, he doesn't say those days were not happy. Many children ran away to the streets to avoid violence as most of them suffered ill-treatment from their families (Martinsson, 2017, as cited in Sharma, 2020). In Mahila's case, it's different. He ran away to the streets from school.

Corporal punishment has been an integral part of how parents discipline their children throughout the history of the United States (Greven, 1991, as cited in Gershoff, 2002). One day, Mahila stole 10 rupees (7.4 cents) from his father's pocket. His father got that money as an advance to be sold from the field. His father caught him because he could not spend money and had to hide it. He got punished. *"There are some things that can't be taught verbally, so it is taken so easily by every family member,"* expressed Mahila.

Once, there was an international wrestling competition in Kathmandu. He was very excited to see the games. There was no way to steal money from his father's pocket again. He took 100 rupees each day for 8 days to go to Kathmandu. He led a group of children from Bhaktapur who went to watch wrestling daily. This made him more confident about doing any new task. School exclusion and youth crime are issues even today. The research findings of Berridge et al. (2001) confirm earlier research on the extreme social and educational disadvantage present in the backgrounds of young people who experience permanent exclusion from school and/or offending.

## **Fishing**

Fishing was another of Mahila's pastimes. At festivals like Dashain and Tihar, he used to go fishing with some elders in nearby rivers like Hanumante. That was an

exhilarating experience. He did not know a fish could bite. He fell with a fever once because of a fish's bite. The fish was Singri in Nepal Bhasha, the Asian stinging catfish. "Heteropneustes fossilis, also known as Asian stinging catfish or fossil cat, is a species of air sac catfish found in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Bhutan. The stinging catfish is able to deliver a painful sting to humans. Poison from a gland on its pectoral fin spine has been known to be extremely painful. The children's duty was to keep the fish caught by the elders" (iNaturalist, n.d.). The caught fish were sold to Bhatii (restaurant), and in return, everybody got some liquor and *Khaja*.

Mahila learned cycling in the same period. Stealing an egg was enough to get a cycle on hire for an hour. He could get 60 paisa (0.45 cents) for an egg. Generally, stealing is an attempt by children and young people to connect, feel safe, gain some control over their lives, and gain access to the things they believe that they need. Generally, stealing is an attempt by children and young people to connect, feel safe, gain some control over their lives, and access the things they believe they need (Government of South Australia, n.d.).

Mahila wasn't interested in going to the field with his parents and working for a whole day. His father tried to convince him but in vain. Mahila could not run away from the field. Sometimes, Mahila was lured by the money he earned after working in the field. However, he learned every job in the field. He had learned to grow different varieties of crops by just observing and helping his parents. The social learning theory says that one learns through observations by integrating and emulating the behaviors of others. Most of what we learn is acquired by simply watching and listening to others (Gosai, 2022).

### **A Milestone in Life**

Many in the locality saw Mahila as a spoiled boy. One day, a gentleman took him aside and urged him to change his ways, saying he couldn't spend his life doing nothing but playing. The gentleman might have been observing his activities for a long. Most of Ram's antics were just mischief - nothing more. Counseling is helpful in the learning process. Counseling and guidance help children discard negative ideas from the surrounding environment. There should be early interventions for negative ideas, which can otherwise hinder emotional and social development. According to Vostanis and

Bell (2020), guidance and counseling help people be aware of themselves and how they react to the environment. This process also helps them determine personal meaning for behavior and establish and classify goals and values for future behavior. A loving approach can inspire a child to behave well. The gentleman's words like *Gobar Ganesh, Nhhepui Ki chon chonala?* (Is your brain spoiled?) struck Mahila. The negative words were like a big slap on his cheeks. Punishment can also increase student learning motivation for actions committed so that they do not repeat poor doings (Haiyudi et al., 2023). Punishment can also be used as a good lesson. By then, he had gained some awareness of how things truly were. He made a conscious decision to modify his behavior and daily routines.

Mahila decided to work and make his way to earn money. He started as a laborer to carry bricks. He had to carry bricks for the whole day but could earn hardly 1 or 1 a half rupee. However, he was happy that he had earned his own money. By age 14, he was earning six rupees a day working in house construction. He had some unhappy moments when the house owner discriminated in serving food items. The mason and carpenters were given good delicacies, but Mahila couldn't get them. Many times, Mahila became envious of such discrimination. "Workplace discrimination denotes differential treatment while recruiting, assigning job positions, evaluations, and payments. Several types of harassment also come under workplace discrimination" (Devah, 2009, as cited in Sharma & Mann, 2020). It encompasses treating persons otherwise, mainly because of their gender, race, age, bodily look. However, Mahila did not compromise his duties to carry the vast loads with the same vigor. In return, he was also given those delicious food items.

It seemed Mahila was born to have experienced hardship in different places. He got to work in Kathmandu in road and sewage system construction. He got 7 rupees in a day as a wage. He worked there for six months. There were many other friends from Bhaktapur working with him. The Jyami Nayo, coordinator of the workers from Bhaktapur used to collect bread from Bhaktapur, which was enough for dozens of people for a whole week. He reflects on those days, "*One week old and dry bread was so tasty! Hunger made even scraps taste divine. We could eat 3 or 4 times more than usual in our house though there was only watery Dal to savour with rice*".

The workers were not satisfied with the wage provided and had a strike to raise the wage. This case reminded Marx (1844), who explained that wages are determined through the antagonistic struggle between capitalists and workers. *"All the workers became united, and we participated in the demonstrations. The project managers agreed to raise the wage by one rupee. That was my first experience of the power of unity and organization,"* opines Mahila. The incident made Mahila politically aware.

After a six-month stay in Kathmandu, he and other friends returned to Bhaktapur, but he felt he had lost something. His school friends were studying at the high school level and did not care to speak with him. That hit his mind. Seeing his friends going to school with their books and copies filled him with restless envy.

There was no question of staying without doing anything else. Mahila was always ready to have a new experience of hard labor. He started to work again in a brick factory but as a brickmaker. He went to Lunbu in the Lalitpur district, where he stayed alone and far from home. It required strong courage for the youngsters. Mahila had to rise at 4 a.m. and work until 6 p.m. Chilly mornings! Ice, cold water! Bloody hands! He never felt defeated. Money was there as a reinforcement. Bandura (1971, p. 3) states that reinforcement conditions also have strong incentive-motivational effects because of man's anticipatory capacity. Mahila had a strong commitment to earn good money on his own toil.

## **Marriage**

Marriage is a legal and social coexistence between two persons whose responsibilities and rights are defined by law and social traditions (Dhuli & Dhuli, 2024). Mahila married a local girl arranged by his parents at the age of 15. She was brought to his home 15 days earlier than the formal marriage processing. Although he didn't know what it was like to be a husband, it was still a responsibility that Mahila had to bear.

People often say that *Byo yata kin si ka* (one will learn after marriage). Mahila had heard many sayings like *Abwa ama ya kapale chhusya musya siye data le chhu matlav* (one ignores until they depend upon their parents). After marriage, partners learn to understand each other's needs, preferences, and emotional landscapes. One has to learn how to handle disagreements constructively, fostering mutual respect and communication. Couples often develop new skills, such as financial management and

parenting, for collective growth. Mahila is fortunate enough to get enough support from his spouse to develop new ideas and careers.

### **Carpentry: Another Challenge**

Mahila used to wonder about the use of tools that his father had kept in his house. He tried to use the tools to make wooden windows or small boxes.

*One summer day I made a plan to make a window net to protect my home from mosquito. There was already a window but I wanted to add iron-net with wooden frame on the window. There used to be chisel in almost every home of Newar to engrave Lohan ma (stone mortar). I tried to make it myself and when finally, I did it, I was very excited to get my task complete.*

This event encouraged Mahila to work on wood. He was so interested in learning carpentry that he tried to get a chance to work in a local furniture workshop. But, in those days, carpentry was taken as a profession of the Shilpakars, a defined caste. The craft of woodcarving was forbidden to those outside the Shilpakar caste.

Bhaktapur Development Project (BDP), 'an integrated urban development project,' sometimes better known among the locals as the 'German Restoration Project'(1974), was to train wood carvings in Bhaktapur, but it was limited to the Shilpakars. BDP revitalized the woodcarvings once again in Bhaktapur.

According to Becker-Ritterspach (2024.), architect and deputy head of the BDP, the project "emphasizes the training of craftsmen and workers, generally in the building trades, in new methods which can be applied to traditional-style buildings." The program focuses on on-site training and also includes instruction in updated technology such as documenting existing methods, innovating from traditional techniques, incorporating foreign methods, and adapting them to local needs.

Mahila asked the authorities but could not get a chance to enter the training. But, Laxmi Narayan, a social activist of Bhaktapur, started a furniture workshop in Mahila's locality. An old Shilpakar was the primary person to lead the workshop in making different objects. Mahila approached Laxmi Narayan and requested to have an opportunity to learn carpentry. To his amazement, he got a golden chance to enter the world of carpentry. He aimed to learn how furniture and other wooden works were done. He never cared about the money he got. He even did not get any money for two

months. However, he was more than happy. Then he got 4 rupees (3 cents) in a day for the work he did. His total concentration was on the guidelines given by the Guru. That is why the Guru liked him. *"Within one and half years of practice, I felt myself as a carpenter. I felt like I was more than a School Leaving Certificate (SLC, equivalent to class 10) degree holder,"* Mahila emphasizes. The workshop did not run for long, and he had to change to another workshop that could fulfill his desire to learn more about wooden works. Interest is both cause and consequences of learning. Learning is the constructive, dynamic, and creative reconceptualization of internal knowledge (Iran-Najad, 1992).

Ram Krishna was a famous carpenter of Bhaktapur in those days. He had a good knowledge of carpentry. He was running a sawmill as well. He was special in renovating old buildings. Mahila was fortunate enough that Ram Krishna believed in him and appointed him as his co-worker. Mahila performed his best for four years. That was one of the golden days to learn something about furniture. Mahila reflects: *"I was restless in learning the master's ideas. I could not sleep in many nights because of the work pressure."* This is how he learned to make different furniture items like Sanduk, wooden storage trunk, a masterpiece of Newar woodcarving from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. It was used to store sacred texts, ceremonial items (like mala beads or tantric implements), or bridal dowries (pottery ornaments, heirlooms). Making a Sanduk was one of the most challenging tasks. He made cupboards, chairs, hand-loom, Charkha, and many others. That was like the completion of a bachelor's degree in woodworking. His passion for carpentry drove him to master every aspect of the craft. *"Chhagu jya safal jula kin megu jya yaye man daigu.* (Once I got success in a task, I would be excited to do more). Success in a task increases excitement and motivation to tackle more tasks. Self-efficacy of Bandura (1997) refers to an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. When one gets success in a task, his/her self-efficacy improves. This heightened confidence encourages him/her to take on new challenges, as he/she now perceives them as achievable. Bandura (1997) states that mastery experiences are the key source of efficacy information, as they offer genuine proof of one's ability to succeed. Achieving success strengthens personal efficacy beliefs, while failures can diminish them, particularly if they happen before efficacy is well-established.

In operant conditioning, positive reinforcement involves the addition of a reinforcing stimulus following a behavior that makes it more likely that the behavior will occur again in the future (Cherry, 2024). When a reward is obtained after an action, that particular behavior will be strengthened. Dewey (1913) characterized interest as an active, dynamic engagement with a subject, stating that true interest involves being actively concerned, in contrast to mere passive feelings that can be static or inert. According to Harackiewicz and Hulleman (2009), as individuals deepen their understanding of a subject, their sense of competence can increase, which in turn enhances their engagement with the task.

At the age of 23, Mahila took a new turn. He decided to start his own workshop. He had some money that he had earned, so he added a loan of 25 hundred rupees. He was going to face another challenge. The satisfaction of the customers was the prime thing for him. He did not care about the money he was going to earn. He was satisfied with whatever the customers provided him.

In Lucas and Moreira's (2009) study, informal learning can be seen as a "self-directed, incidental, intentional, nonintentional or social form of learning" (p. 326). Self-directed learning can be defined as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help from others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 18).

### **Wood Carving Trainee and Trainer**

Learning never ends. Every day becomes a new day to learn new ideas for progress. Bhaktapur Municipality had done a big project to renovate the known Nyatapola (Five Storey Temple), the monument included in world heritage sites, in 1997, which took approximately nine months.

The municipality planned to train the local youths. Specifically, those already working as carpenters on wood carvings because it required many artists. It was another golden opportunity for Mahila to learn a new course of woodcarvings. The training happened to be another milestone in his life. He was ready to leave everything to get the training. His workshop did not function well during training, but he did not mind. He was very much determined to complete his course. Immediately after completing

the training, all the trainees got involved in renovating the Bhairab temple at Taumadhi Square.

Bhaktapur Municipality gave him many other jobs in wood carvings, so he never had time for leisure. The municipality planned to build huge gates (Dhwaka) at three different entry points of the city: Chyamasing, Byasi, and Bharwacho. Mahila feels proud to say that he took every step to make those gates. He was so satisfied with his historical tasks. He has visited different districts to make the pagoda-style temple, including Argakhanchi, Kaski, Kathmandu, and Rupandehi.

Today, Mahila has started a workshop covering about 10 Ropani (500 square meters) of land. One of his aims to start that workshop is to transfer knowledge to the new generation. Mahila wishes: "Gurupini pakhen jin yeko sayekedata, aa jin mepinta sena chona. Tho jya syanegu jya juyontun chonema! (I learned a lot from my Gurus; now, I am transferring my skills to others. May the transfer of skill continue forever!)" So, Mahila innovates ideas and teaches the students about woodcarvings in his workshop. More importantly, he has been a tutor of woodcarvings by the Bhaktapur Municipality. He says: "Baidya senebale chhata khan banki yaye ma dhaigu. Jin sayako fukakan sengha. Saa liyo fukan pihan wana. Pihan wani jaka masene majyu. (It is said that one point should be taught while teaching Baidya, healing methods. But, I have taught everything I know. All who learn in my workshop have gone to start a new startup. But, I should not stop training). He says:

*Jita chhu lage jui dhasa fukan saya, ayena chhu na masaya. Chhukin he guru juye makhan. Aayasan senegu jya tomata. Senebale tha nan sayeke daigu. (I have learnt a lot but not enough depth. I couldn't be a formal Guru (Tutor) as I am not perfect in all these. However, I do train the new commers. We learn ourselves while training others.)*

When we explain some concepts, it requires clarity and depth and it reinforces what we know and fills gaps in understanding. Trainees often asked Mahila questions he may not have considered, leading him to explore new ideas or revisit old ones. He thinks that while teaching he reflects on how he learned, which refines his approach and makes him a better learner.

Mahila is good at playing musical instruments including Khincha (Madal), Pachhima, Nagara, Dholak, Dhimay, Bansuri, Lalakhin, Harmonium, Tabala, etc. He



finds that music refreshes his mind during woodworking. The melodies provide both the relaxation and concentration essential to his craft. While working on wood crafts he often listens to the music, mostly Newari songs. A research study done by University of Windsor, Canada to confirm the effect of listening to music reported its positive effect on work performance (Kumar et al, 2016). Laborious people learn quick. Mahila states:

*Jyakhe dhekamo taipisan jyasayeke faimakhu. Tho jita daigu makhu, chhaye mehanat yayegu dhaipun manuta thahan he woimakhu. Thagu chhemata dako jya yaipunsa jya sayekagu khaneda. (Those who are lazy don't learn skills. Those people don't get success if he/she thinks not to do hard labour if all the benefits go to the owner.)*

Mahila once got up early in the morning at 4 a.m. to make a wooden support to a traditional building of a neighbor of the house that he was doing some reconstruction works. He had an insight of falling the other house. In most of the cases he makes plans early in the mornings or during night times. Though stress shadowed every project, Ram's determination never wavered. He says: "*Tanab yagu khan lhanha byai makhu. Tara tanab wolajaka lichile majyu.*" (There is no limit of stress. But, one should not stay behind). Success demands unwavering focus in one's work. Otherwise the works may be ruined. Mahila opines: "*Gharaghuru yeye majyu. Banlaka yayegu. Lipathenka yayegu bicha yayema.*" (One shouldn't work in a hurry. Consistency is required. The products should be durable.)

Mahila started wood works by making wooden frames of windows and doors first. Such works are called Kora jya (frame works). One should learn to do Kora jya before stepping towards woodcarvings. He says: "*Kora masayeka butta jya sai makhu. Chaukos hone masayeka majyu. Kora jya ka, kha, ga dhayethen kha.*" (One cannot learn woodcarving without learning Kora works. Kora works is like leaning alphabets.)

### **Certification of the Knowledge**

Mahila's unshakable self-belief became his greatest asset. Learning has no finish line; every answer births new questions. Sometimes, he needs more English, but he can manage it with the help of his assistants. He wished to learn English and other languages so that he could have direct conversations with the foreigners. He is afraid whether the translator has got the correct meaning of him. Sometimes he feels awkward when he can't answer some question of the foreigners.

A freshly graduated engineer generally doesn't have the practical knowledge of making temples and other traditional type monuments. In most of cases Mahila had to put his ideas first or he had to teach the engineer. But, he feels bad when the engineer puts his name in the completion paper. Mahila says: "*Jhisan fukan jya yayegu jui, engineeran thaman yanagu dhai. Bona tayagu dasa jhisan signature yayemajyu.*" (We do all the works but the engineer says that he had completed the works. We don't have authority to sign the documents.)

Mahila opines that Pulangu gyan choyo taye maa. Nhugu pustan tho jya yaye maa. (Indigenous knowledge should be recorded and given priority by the new generation). Mahila is worried about the preservation of the indigenous knowledge the people have. They may be lost with the demise of the people with such genius knowledge. Such knowledge should be recognized and validated.

The Kathmandu Valley is an important home to ancient societies and cultures worldwide. The skills and knowledge transferred by past people, including the woodworking skills that Mahila, too, had, have immense value today and for the future.

Schools, colleges, and universities were started to produce qualified workers to meet the requirements of the time, but now the time is different. The growth of knowledge and technology is so high that a person who learned one thing today might be handicapped by a new thing that he is going to face tomorrow. Mahila's life and learning prove that one should fulfill the need of time!

### Discussion

The case of Mahila's family underscores the critical role of informal learning within household and community settings, aligning with Coombs and Ahmed's (1974) assertion that the majority of lifelong learning occurs outside formal structures.

Manglal and his wife (Mahila's parents), despite their illiteracy, exemplify how practical skills, cultural practices, and daily labor serve as means for knowledge transmission. Their experiences illustrate how socio-economic limitations can shape alternative pathways of learning, where survival skills (e.g., farming, weaving, masonry) are intertwined with social education.

### **Family as the Foundation of Informal Learning**

Mahila's narrative highlights the family as a primary site of experiential learning. His parents' skills in weaving, farming, and problem-solving were not merely economic activities but learning tools. His mother's weaving, for instance, was both a livelihood strategy and a tacit lesson in discipline, hard work, and cultural preservation. This aligns with Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory, where knowledge emerges through the transformation of lived experience. In this view of experiential learning, the emphasis is often on direct sense experience and in-context action as the primary source of learning, often down-playing a role for thinking, analysis, and academic knowledge (Kolb, 2015). The children's involvement in household chores (cooking, fetching water) further demonstrates how informal learning is embedded in routine practices.

### **Socio-Economic Context and Learning**

Manglal's struggles with illiteracy and exploitation by the Sahujis reveal how structural inequalities shape learning opportunities. His later engagement with religious texts (e.g., Chanakya) suggests that marginalized individuals may seek non-formal paths for empowerment. Meanwhile, the mother's weaving expertise challenges conventional notions of "illiteracy". It shows that practical competencies often compensate formal education in certain contexts.

### **Festivals and Community as Learning Spaces**

The preparation for Dashain and Bisket, the two major festivals of Bhaktapur, underscores how cultural rituals serve as immersive learning environments. Mahila's reflection - "*We used to be very happy to get new pieces of cloth*" - links emotional motivation to skill acquisition. Similarly, communal activities (jatra, mela) blend entertainment with socialization, reinforcing Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on social interaction in cognitive development. Cognitive development is a socially mediated process in which children acquire cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society (McLeod, 2024).

### **Implications for Education Policy**

This case study challenges the hegemony of formal schooling in development discourse. While literacy remains vital, policymakers should recognize informal

learning as a legitimate and complementary system, particularly in agrarian or marginalized communities. Programs leveraging local expertise (e.g., carving and weaving workshops) could bridge gaps between traditional knowledge and formal curricula.

The case of Mahila's school experiences provides critical insights into the connections of poverty, informal learning, corporal punishment, and child agency in shaping educational paths. His story highlights systemic failures in formal schooling while revealing how downtrodden children direct learning through different means.

### **Economic Barriers to Formal Education**

Mahila's schooling was manifested by material deprivation - makeshift school bag (made from a fertilizer sack). It reflected by Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, where economic disadvantage limits access to education (as cited in Sullivan, 2001). In his 1974 work, Bourdieu asserts that education serves as a powerful mechanism for maintaining current social structures by ostensibly justifying social inequalities and validating cultural heritage, which he describes as a social gift misperceived as a natural one.

### **Corporal Punishment and School Dropout**

Mahila's abrupt exit from school after a ruthless beating is an example how violence in schools perpetuates exclusion. His humiliation and subsequent avoidance of school resonate with Bauer et al.'s (1990) findings that corporal punishment fails as a disciplinary tool and instead fosters trauma. Bauer et. al. (1990) concluded that corporal punishment did not provide any significant advantages in a school setting.

### **Informal Learning and Agency in Marginalized Spaces**

Deprived of schooling, Mahila turned to play, labor, and street survival as alternative learning sites. Games (Aspas, Chakki) taught strategic thinking, resourcefulness, and competition, echoing Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on play in cognitive development.

Fishing and cycling provided Mahila practical skills (negotiation, risk assessment) and economic agency (selling fish, renting cycles). The catfish incident - where Mahila learned through painful experience - illustrates Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Akella (2010) mentions that Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as a 'holistic

integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, cognition and behavior'. He further says that learning is 'a continuous process grounded in experience'.

### **Social Learning and Indigenous Knowledge**

Mahila's eventual mastery of farming - despite initial resistance - demonstrates Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. According to Nebavi and Bijandi (2012), Bandura's social learning theory posits that individuals learn through interactions in a social context and by observing the behaviors of others. People tend to assimilate and imitate behaviors, particularly when they have positive observational experiences or when rewards are associated with those behaviors.

By observing his parents, Mahila internalized agricultural techniques, showing how informal apprenticeships transmit indigenous knowledge. This challenges formal education's monopoly on 'legitimate' learning.

### **Resilience, Informal Learning, and Indigenous Knowledge Preservation**

Mahila's life trajectory - from a detached youth to a master carpenter and woodcarving trainer - offers profound insights into informal learning, caste barriers, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. His story challenges conventional education paradigms while highlighting the transformative power of mentorship, intrinsic motivation, and socio-economic resilience.

### **Mentorship and the Turning Point**

Mahila's transformation began with a critical intervention - a local gentleman's blunt yet impactful words ("Gobar Ganesh, is your brain spoiled?"). This moment aligns with Vostanis and Bell's (2020) statement that counseling can redirect negative behaviors by fostering self-awareness.

### **Informal Learning and Self-Directed Skill Acquisition**

Mahila's transition to labor (brick-carrying, carpentry) exemplifies Knowles' (1975) self-directed learning theory, where individuals proactively identify and address skill gaps. According to Loeng (2020), research supports that self-directed learners (per Knowles' theory) are more motivated, retain knowledge better, and apply it more effectively in real-world contexts than passive learners.

Mahila's unpaid apprenticeship under Laxmi Narayan's workshop reflects Lucas and Moreira's (2009) observation that informal learning is often intentional yet non-institutional. Despite caste restrictions (carpentry being traditionally reserved for Shilpakars), Mahila's perseverance underscores how marginalized individuals navigate structural barriers through ordinary opportunities.

His mastery of carpentry - described as his "bachelor's degree in woodworking" - illustrates Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory: each success (e.g., crafting a window net) reinforced his belief in his capabilities, motivating him to tackle complex projects like Sanduk (traditional cabinets).

### **Labor Exploitation and Class Consciousness**

Mahila's experience in Kathmandu's sewage construction - where workers unionized to demand higher wages - mirrors Marx's (1844) analysis of labor-capital antagonism. His political awakening ("the power of unity") reveals how exploitative labor conditions can foster collective agency, a theme echoed in contemporary labor movements (Devah, 2009, as cited in Sharma & Mann, 2020). The intersection of caste and labor is further evident in workplace discrimination (e.g., food disparities for low-status workers), highlighting how social hierarchies permeate informal economies.

### **Indigenous Knowledge and Institutional Erasure**

Mahila's role in restoring Bhaktapur's heritage temples (e.g., Nyatapola Temple, Bhairav Temple) underscores the tension between indigenous expertise and formal credentialism. Despite his mastery, engineers monopolized credit ("We do all the work, but the engineer signs"), reflecting systemic epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Epistemic injustice refers to a wrong done to someone as a knower or transmitter of knowledge: due to unjustified prejudice, someone is unfairly judged to not have the knowledge or reasonable beliefs that they actually have (Demirtas, 2020).

Mahila's call to document indigenous knowledge ("Pulangu gyan choyo taye maa") highlights the urgency of documenting oral traditions and practical wisdom before they disappear. It also resonates with global movements to decolonize heritage preservation (Smith, 2008). Smith (2008) stated that history is important for understanding the present and that reclaiming history is critical and essential of decolonization.

Mahila's struggle with English symbolizes a broader issue: language as a tool of exclusion. Bhaktapur Development Project's caste-exclusive training further illustrates how development initiatives can perpetuate exclusion, even while revitalizing traditions. However, Bhaktapur Municipality Council started training of woodcarving including any caste groups of people that became a milestone of the renovation and reconstructions projects of the heritages of Bhaktapur.

### **Music, Stress, and Holistic Learning**

The subjectivity of my being is stretched in space over time. Lived space is thus dynamic and dependent on temporality (Fuchs, 2007). The distance within a lived space depends upon how I feel about the time spent with myself or others (Bollnow, 1961).

### **Conclusion**

Mahila's journey exemplifies education as a lived, nonlinear process - shaped by poverty, mentorship, and self-reinvention. His story challenges policymakers to legitimize informal learning, confront caste-based exclusion, and center indigenous knowledge in heritage economies. As he asserts, "May the transfer of skill continue forever" - a call to honor and sustain the wisdom of marginalized artisans before it is irrevocably lost.

Mahila's story exposes how structural inequities - economic, institutional, and social - redirect learning from classrooms to streets. Yet, his resilience underscores the agency of marginalized children in crafting their own educations. Policymakers must address systemic violence and poverty while valuing informal and experiential knowledge as a legitimate form of learning.

The Governments can recognize informal skills of the people by certifying indigenous artisans like Mahila. Development projects may actively breakdown caste barriers in skill programs. Governments can further strengthen protections for informal workers to prevent wage exploitation. It can support oral history projects to preserve indigenous knowledge threatened by globalization. Schools can adopt trauma-informed discipline policies to retain vulnerable students. Integrating local games, fishing, and farming into curricula could bridge formal and informal learning.

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