

“We Are Strangers Here”: Everyday Peer Exclusion and the Schooling Experiences of Indigenous Kalash Students in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the impact of peer relationships on the education of Kalash students, an indigenous polytheistic minority in north Pakistan. Although much of the scholarship on minority education in Pakistan has centred on structural forms of inequality including bias in curriculum and marginalisation of institutions, little has been done to understand the everyday social interactions in which minority groups experience and reproduce exclusion.

Based on qualitative data provided by semistructured interviews with 160 students (80 Kalash and 80 Muslim), the teachers and school principals of four secondary schools located in the Kalash valleys, this paper examines how peer processes work in the formal classroom environment and the informal school context. The results show that exclusion is not an isolated event and it is entrenched in daily routines like sitting arrangements, group work and social interaction.

Three patterns, which are interrelated, are physical separation, subtle and overt forms of stereotyping, and emotional marginalization. These activities lead to less classroom engagement, lower academic self-esteem and low perceived belongingness among the Kalash students. Institutional silence, reduced teacher intervention, and the absence of formal inclusion policies, further support such dynamics as demonstrated in the analysis.

The paper is founded on the intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) to show how religious identity and gender and socioeconomic status interact to enhance marginalization. The article argues that peer exclusion cannot be viewed as a personal behavior but it is part of a bigger social and institutional picture. Long-term interventions at the school level, i.e., teacher training, policy formulating, and curriculum reforms in order to make learning environments inclusive are needed to fight such dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Schools are frequently pictured as the arena of equal opportunities, where students of diverse backgrounds are united to learn under the same conditions. However, there is an increasing body of research indicating that schools are also social spaces where inequalities are recreated in the daily interaction. Peer relationships are considered to be among the most powerful of these interactions and are at the center of determining the sense of belonging, identity, and academic engagement of students (Rubin et al., 2006).

In the case of students of minority groups, peer interaction may turn out as a place where difference is not only acknowledged but also strengthened. It can either be overt discrimination, but more frequently occurs in subtle forms including being left out of the group work, avoidance in social places or simple everyday stereotyping. These behaviors can be seen as minor, but they can have a substantial impact on the education of students when taking place in a sequential manner.

In Pakistan, the discussion of minority education has always been based on structural problems, such as curriculum bias, unequal access to resources, and institutional discrimination (Khan, 2020; Malik, 2017). These factors, though admittedly crucial, are not entirely reflective of the daily experience of inequality in schools. Specifically, peer dynamics have not been studied in detail yet, although there is also evidence that social interaction is one of the fundamental mechanisms by which exclusion is perpetuated (Iqbal, 2022).

The Kalash people provide a rather eye-opening perspective through which to take a closer look at these processes. Being one of the most distinctive and the smallest indigenous community in Pakistan, the Kalash are distinguished by polytheistic faith, distinct cultural customs, and noticeable identity signs

that cannot be mixed with the Muslim majority (Hassan, 2018). Residing in remote Chitral valleys, Kalash students frequently attend schools that they are numerically minority in, and this situation brings about the circumstances where difference becomes extremely visible.

Past studies have reported some types of marginalization that faced the Kalash, especially regarding curriculum exclusion and religious compulsions (Hussain and Hussain, 2018). Less focus has however been directed to the experiences of Kalash students in terms of daily interactions in the school settings, how they are viewed by their classmates and how these affect their engagement in education.

This paper aims to fill that gap by presenting peer relations as one of the key aspects in educational experience. Instead of considering discrimination as a sequence of single events, the study treats it as a complex of practices that are integrated in the everyday life of schools. It asks:

What is the peer interaction of Kalash students in schools?

What are the manifestations of social exclusion in day-to-day situations?

What is the comprehension and justification of these practices among majority-group students?

What are the academic and emotional outcomes?

What are the reactions and/or the unresponsiveness of schools to these dynamics?

The study relies on an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989) to answer these questions because it enables an analysis of the interaction of various dimensions of identity, especially religion, gender, and socioeconomic status, to create experiences of exclusion.

This paper will add to a more elusive perspective of educational inequality through an emphasis on the micro-level processes of

peer interaction. It states that, without modifying the social setting in classroom, inclusivity attempts will be half-baked.

Literature Review

Peer Relations and Educational Inequality.

It has been widely accepted that peer relationship is one of the factors that affect the development of students. Schools, in addition to the academic education, are social places where identities are negotiated and hierarchies established (Rubin et al., 2006). Such processes can be subtle and continuous forms of exclusion to minority students.

Studies in other settings have demonstrated that peer exclusion may be done in a variety of ways, which may include physical segregation, verbal abuse, and social exclusion (Craig et al., 2009). Notably, these behaviors may not be necessarily acknowledged as bullying, but they may also lead to equally important outcomes on the psychological wellbeing and academic participation of students.

Indigenous students and international trends of exclusion.

Surveys in other nations like Canada, Australia or New Zealand have consistently recorded that indigenous students are more marginalized at school (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012). These are experiences usually associated with larger historical and cultural inequalities, influencing the perception and appreciation of indigenous identities.

This marginalization has been linked to poor performance in academics, low attendance, and increased drop-outs (Dadds and Hart-Smith, 2018). Nevertheless, the majority of this research is located in the Western settings, which creates an empty space in comprehending how such dynamics work in other places.

Education of minorities in Pakistan.

Minority students in Pakistan are often faced with institutional and social discrimination. Experiences of exclusion have been reported, such as being refused food, or seat allocation, which are frequently defended by religious beliefs (Hussain and Hussain, 2018; Iqbal, 2022).

Nevertheless, peer interaction is not well studied. The majority of the studies are concentrated on structural inequalities but not day-to-day social processes.

Teaching, Schools, and the Hidden Curriculum.

Schools either contribute significantly to the perpetuation or are a major challenge to social inequalities. The hidden curriculum concept brings into focus the fact that values and norms are passed on implicitly in day to day practices (Banks, 2006).

By not responding to discriminatory behavior, teachers can unwittingly legitimize it (Gay, 2010). This is more noticeable in the situations when the teacher training is not oriented towards diversity (Rehman, 2015).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality offers a conceptual framework in comprehending the interaction of various types of inequality (Crenshaw, 1989). In the school, this can be taken to mean the appreciation of the fact that the experiences of students are determined by conflicting identities.

Research Gap

No in-depth research on peer exclusion among Kalash students exists. This paper fills that knowledge gap by offering a detailed qualitative study.

Methodology

The given research follows a qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2018) that allows

delving into social interaction in real-life situations.

Research Site

The Kalash valleys were chosen and four government schools were selected.

Participants

- 160 students
- 20 teachers
- 4 principals

Data Collection

- Semistructured interviews
- Observations

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Ethics

Anonymous informed consent.

Findings

The data analysis showed that peer exclusion was not felt as a sequence of single isolated events, but a repetitive and patterned feature of day-to-day school life. In interviews and observations, three dimensions of exclusion have been identified that are interrelated and linked: physical separation, symbolic/verbal differentiation, and emotional marginalization with academic outcomes. These dimensions often intersected each other and supported each other.

Physical Segregation: Everyday Practices of Distancing.

One of the most evident and often reported forms of exclusion was physical distancing. This was manifested in sitting in classrooms, group activities and other less formal activities such as lunch and playtime.

students of Kalash said and said, how the separation had become a natural thing:

We have a tendency to sit on one side at school. They never come and sit with us even

when there is a space. Apparently, there exists some invisible line.

This extended beyond the classroom as explained by another student:

During lunch, we eat with our group and we do not share food. It is now a commonplace.

These descriptions were confirmed by classroom session observations. Kalash students would sit at the back or at the periphery of the classroom but the Muslim students would sit at the centre. Group work also contributed to this trend since students would form groups depending on their religious affiliation unless otherwise directed by their teachers.

Muslim students did not reject this partition, but often in the form of a preference, but not exclusion:

We sit among our own--we do not think quite a lot--it comes.

However, some other replies were also possible that presupposed some assumptions: We are more home with those who are our kind.

In other cases this alienation was directly related to the attitudes of otherness:

We do not tell everything as we are not accustomed to their life style.

Together, these findings point to the fact that physical segregation is not enforced by formal policies, but is a by-product of the customary practices that are rarely questioned.

Stereotyping and Symbolic Boundaries.

Other physical distancing notwithstanding, there were students of Kalash who said that they felt labeled, undermined, or significantly different. These forms of exclusion were largely explicit yet embedded in the day-to-day discourse.

The feeling of academic inferiority was one of the themes:

We are not allowed to do anything of importance when we work in groups, they do not think that we are good in studies.

Another student reflected:

They do not listen to me, even when I attempt to contribute.

The attitudes of Muslim students showed how these assumptions were justified:

We are of different backgrounds, and therefore at times we have problems with collaborating.

Religious logic was involved in certain instances:

We are taught to be cautious not to mingle excessively with other people sharing different beliefs.

There were also cases of direct labeling by teachers:

I have heard students speak with the use of words that distinguish between us and them. Sometimes, they are not even aware of how detrimental it is.

These results indicate that there is a symbolic boundary exceeding the physical distance. The Kalash students were not merely placed in a socially isolated position, but they were also different based on their ability, identity, and belonging.

Emotional Marginalization and Academic Effects.

With time, recurring encounters of exclusion helped to make Kalash students feel highly emotionally isolated. Many reported not being connected to the social life of the school.

One student explained:

Occasionally I would say that I am basically in the classroom, but not in it.

Another shared:

I have days that I do not feel like going to school because I know I am going to be alone. This feeling of being excluded had definite classroom implications:

I am not talking, even though I may know the answer, I become nervous and believe that people are looking down on me.

This trend was confirmed by teachers:

Kalash students are

usually silent. It is not that they do not comprehend, they just doubt of speaking.

The decreased involvement, in its turn, had an impact on academic engagement. Those students who did not speak, do any group work, or interact in the classroom had lesser chances to show their skills.

What we see here is a process whereby social exclusion becomes progressively translated into academic disadvantage not by direct barriers, but by the daily intercourse.

Intersectional Aspects of Exclusion.

Not all Kalash students had the same experiences of exclusion. The factors of gender and socioeconomic status were significant in influencing the experience of exclusion.

Kalash girls explained how they had to deal with several layers of marginalization:

Girls find it more difficult. We are already limited to a certain extent, and we are left out in school, too.

On the same note, the students who identified with low-income backgrounds also stated that they experienced other stigma:

At times they comment on clothes or shoes. It makes you feel different in a different way.

These results underscore the interaction of various differentiations, which makes the experience of exclusion even worse to some students.

Institutional Responses: Structureless Awareness.

Principals and teachers tended to agree that they were excluded but the answers were usually quite informal and inconsistent.

One teacher noted:

We do attempt to promote mixing among students, but we do not have special training on how to handle such cases.

A principal explained:

We discuss students in case of complaint, however, there is no official policy that will lead us.

This implies that there is awareness but institutional capability to deal with the problem is weak.

Discussion

The results emphasize the fact that peer exclusion is a normal social phenomenon, and not a rare event. This would change the emphasis on personal discrimination, to the larger social context where these behaviors are socialized.

The notion of the hidden curriculum comes in handy here. Students can pick up implicit lessons about hierarchy and belonging by the everyday practices of who sits together, who talks, and who is part of a group (Banks, 2006). Otherwise, these tendencies support the status quo of societal divisions.

The other factor that reinforces exclusion is institutional inaction. In the absence of formal policies or education, responses are confined to informal attempts, which are too little to confront ingrained norms.

Intersectionality is also important as demonstrated by the findings (Crenshaw, 1989). Exclusion is never encountered in one dimension but it comes out as a result of a combination of religion, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Lastly, the research is important to the larger discussions about educational disparity because it demonstrates that peer relations are a process that supports the reproduction of disadvantage. These trends have been found to occur in other contexts (O'Hanlon, 2010; Nambissan, 2010), implying that everyday interaction is a vital factor towards the development of educational outcomes at the international level.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that peer exclusion is a key theme of schooling experiences of Kalash students. However,

exclusionary

practices are not isolated cases but are a part of the daily social life of schools.

Such processes impact the emotional wellbeing and academic engagement greatly. To handle them, it will be necessary to go beyond informal responses to formal and long-term interventions.

The concept of educational inclusion should therefore be perceived not just within the context of access, but participation, recognition and belonging.

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