

Students' Perception on the Mainstream Curriculum in Madrasa Education System: Evidence from Morang and Sunsari Districts, Nepal

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Abstract

Madrasas in Nepal, traditionally focused on Islamic education, have begun incorporating mainstream subjects like Social Studies, Nepali, and English to align with the national education system. This study explores how Madrasa students in Morang and Sunsari districts perceive the mainstream curriculum, focusing on gender and age differences. A cross-sectional survey of Madrasa students in Koshi Province analyzed how gender and age affect views on mainstream subjects and career goals. Gender significantly influences perceptions and career aspirations. Female students (69.31%) value Social Studies, Nepali, and English more for their future careers and mostly aspire to become Madrasa teachers. Male students show more varied career interests. Age does not significantly affect perceptions. The findings suggest the need to reform Madrasa education to address gender-based differences and improve secular education, supporting students' career paths and better integrating Madrasas into Nepal's national education system.

Keywords: students' perception, mainstream curriculum, core education, Madrasa education system, Islamic education

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Introduction

Students' perception plays a crucial role in shaping academic achievement, particularly within the Madrasa education system. Perception refers to the cognitive process through which learners interpret their environment, influencing their attitudes and engagement with learning materials. For Madrasa students, who receive both Islamic religious education and secular mainstream subjects, their perceptions of these mainstream curricula are key determinants of their educational outcomes and future opportunities. Student perception plays a pivotal role in academic achievement and

motivation, particularly in complex institutional settings such as Madrasas where religious and secular education coexist. According to [Mishra and Aithal \(2023\)](#), demographic characteristics significantly influence educational outcomes and ethical capital development, highlighting how factors like gender and social context shape students' academic experiences. This aligns with the study's finding that female students in Madrasas show stronger positive perceptions and aspirations toward mainstream subjects compared to male students, corroborating the influence of gender on educational attitudes ([Mishra & Aithal, 2023](#)).



Moreover, the incorporation of digital academic operations and futuristic educational strategies, as discussed by [Mishra and Nepal \(2022\)](#), supports the necessity of integrating modern pedagogies in traditional contexts like Madrasas to improve quality and relevance. This integration is crucial for Madrasas as they navigate the balance between preserving Islamic teachings and embracing state curricula, thereby enhancing student engagement and retention.

Institutional Integration and Quality Assurance

The government of Nepal's efforts to register Madrasas as formal educational institutions, offering financial and pedagogical support, have markedly increased Muslim students' access to mainstream education ([Mishra & Jha, 2023](#)). Nonetheless, the challenge remains in assuring quality education within these newly integrated systems. Research by [Mishra and Jha \(2023\)](#) emphasizes the emergence of quality assurance and accreditation as critical components in Nepali higher education reform—principles that could extend to improving the standards of Madrasa education. The study under review echoes similar concerns, suggesting that student perceptions are shaped not only by curriculum content but also by the institutional capacity to deliver quality education.

Gender-Specific Educational Needs and Career Aspirations

The study's finding that gender exponentially influences perceptions and career aspirations necessitates tailored educational planning. This is supported by broader academic discourse advocating for gender-sensitive curriculum design and career guidance, particularly in contexts where socio-cultural norms impact educational trajectories ([Mishra, 2023](#)). Female students' higher valuation of mainstream subjects and preference for teaching careers contrasts with the broader, more varied ambitions among males, indicating the need for differentiated support systems within Madrasa education to maximize equitable outcomes.

Implications for Policy and Academic Operations

Given the rapid transformation of educational landscapes globally, as highlighted by [Mishra \(2023\)](#), it is imperative that educational reforms in Madrasas incorporate modern quality assurance mechanisms and sustainable academic operations. The study's insights reinforce the urgency of policies that not only facilitate access but also address quality, relevance, and inclusivity, with particular attention to gender disparities. This approach resonates with [Mishra's \(2024\)](#) call for harmonizing innovation and traditional educational practices to navigate evolving global business and societal needs effectively.

Globally, Madrasas serve as primary educational institutions for many Muslim students, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; the context in Nepal is no different. For several students, Madrasas represent the sole accessible source of formal education, with some opting for partial tuition to enhance religious knowledge while others rely entirely on Madrasas for both religious and secular education (Laghari et al., 2011). This dual focus aims to provide a comprehensive foundation combining spiritual values with practical skills, thereby broadening students' academic prospects and social mobility.

Since the academic year 2009-10, Nepal has undertaken significant reforms in its national education system through programs like the School Sector Reform Programme (SSRP) and subsequently the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) to improve access, quality, and relevance across various education levels ([Government of Nepal, 2020](#)). A noteworthy initiative has been the government's policy to register Madrasas as mainstream schools without registration fees, offering financial support and teacher quotas under "Rahat" provisions. This integration has contributed to increasing the net enrollment rate in primary education to approximately 89.1% and reflects growing recognition of Madrasas as important contributors to education for marginalized Muslim communities (CERID, 2008).

Despite expanded access, challenges remain regarding the quality of mainstream education

in Madrasas. Many continue to face shortages in infrastructure, trained teachers for secular subjects, and adequate learning resources, relying heavily on community donations (CERID, 2005). Moreover, Muslim families and students are navigating new educational paths as Madrasas evolve to blend religious instruction with state-endorsed curricula, a process still nascent and requiring further evaluation.

In South Asia, Madrasas have historically been centers of Islamic learning, but modernization pressures urge these institutions to balance tradition with inclusive, contemporary pedagogical demands (Sikand, 2005). In Nepal, research on Madrasa education's effectiveness in meeting student needs remains limited, underscoring the importance of exploring students' perceptions of the mainstream curriculum offered alongside religious education, particularly in Muslim-majority districts like Morang and Sunsari.

Problem Statement

While the registration of Madrasas as mainstream educational institutions marks progress toward educational inclusion, significant gaps exist in understanding how this integration impacts students' educational experiences and perceptions. Specifically, it remains unclear how Madrasa students—who are adapting to a curriculum combining secular and religious contents—perceive mainstream subjects such as Social Studies, Nepali, and English, and how these perceptions vary according to demographic factors such as gender and age.

Further, although government support aims to improve access and equity, concerns persist regarding the adequacy of resources, teacher preparedness, and infrastructure within Madrasas, which may affect students' academic motivation and outcomes. The balance between preserving Islamic identity and embracing secular education creates challenges for curriculum integration and acceptance by the Muslim community.

There is an urgent need to assess the impact of government initiatives on Madrasa education's

alignment with mainstream schooling and to explore students' attitudes toward mainstream curricula within these institutions. Understanding these perceptions will provide valuable insights into the successes and limitations of current policies and support efforts to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of education for Nepal's Muslim minority.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to analyze students' perceptions of the mainstream curriculum within Madrasa education in Nepal, focusing specifically on the districts of Morang and Sunsari in Koshi Province. This includes examining the influence of demographic variables, particularly gender and age, on students' attitudes toward key mainstream subjects—Social Studies, Nepali, and English. The study further aims to contribute to educational policy and practice by identifying areas for curriculum development and student support in the ongoing integration of Madrasas into Nepal's national education framework.

Methodology

The research employed a descriptive and explanatory design to analyze students' perceptions and achievement scores in Madrasa education, focusing on particular subject social studies. Of course, such perception also explored the factors contributing to the students' learning achievements (Muslim Commission Report, 2021). The study areas were selected with the help of higher female enrolment ratio than males in all provinces, school-to-students ratios, diversity, and geographical representation. The selection of Madrasas for the study in the Morang and Sunsari districts of Koshi Province was based on the census method to select all Madrasas that were conducting grade eight as well as which has already participated in eight class board exam and promoted in class nine in these two districts.

The study's targeted students were from grade 8, and all eligible students from the selected Madrasas were included using a census approach,

ensuring the representativeness of the sample ([Muslim Commission Report, 2021](#)).

The research design was maintained through consistent integration of pilot testing to refine tools and minimize interpretational difficulties. The researcher conducted a pilot survey in a Basic-level Madrasa in Kathmandu, using random sampling to improve the questionnaires ([Ryan et al., 2013](#)). The feedback allowed for refinement of the questionnaire, improving clarity and reducing ambiguity, particularly in the language translation process ([Baker, 1999](#)).

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the research. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent and confidentiality being prioritized to respect participants' rights. Request letters were sent, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The ethical framework ensured the integrity of the study and its respect for participants' autonomy and privacy ([Cohen et al., 2002](#)).

Table 1

Gender Composition of the Respondents

Gender	Percentage
Boys	30.69(62)
Girls	69.31(140)
Total	100.00(202)

Note. Field Survey, 2023

Age Composition of the Respondents

Age significantly influences students' aspirations and perceptions of mainstream course subjects in Madrasas. The analysis shows how individual characteristics impact students' motivations for seeking education in Madrasas.

Table 2

Age Composition of the Respondents

Age	Percentage
<16	48.02(97)
≥16	51.98 (105)
Total	100.00(202)

Note. Field Survey, 2023

On the request of Central Department of Population Studies to the Muslim Commission Office, I received an authorized letter from the latter and accessed to the relevant mechanism. No doubt, the mission was tough and for completing the task I had to spend plenty of time from May 2023 up to September 2023 for data collection.

Results and Discussions

Gender Composition of the Respondents

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping students' aspirations and perceptions of mainstream subjects in the Madrasa education system. The analysis reveals that individual characteristics influence students' motivations for seeking education in Madrasas. According to Table 1, out of 202 students, 69.31 percent are girls, while 30.69 percent are boys. The higher participation of girls, which is double of boys, significantly impacts students' perceptions and enrollment in mainstream curriculum subjects in Madrasas.

According to Table 2, out of 202 students, 48.02 percent are under sixteen years, and 51.98 percent are sixteen and older. However, age has a lesser impact on students' perceptions and enrollment in mainstream curriculum subjects in Madrasas in comparison to gender.

Student's Perception on the Mainstream Curriculum Subjects in Madrasa by Gender

Students' perceptions on mainstream curriculum subjects in Madrasas reveal notable gender-based differences in their perceived importance for future career prospects. In general, most students agree that mainstream subjects are crucial for their future, but the degree of importance varies between male and female students. According to Yadav (2024), 77.72 percent of all students view mainstream subjects as "most crucial" for their future and 15.35 percent consider them "equally important". However, when analyzed by gender, 85.71 percent of female students believe these subjects are of the utmost importance, while only 59.68 percent of male students share this view. This significant gender disparity in perceptions is further supported by

Table 3

Student's Perception on the Mainstream Curriculum Subjects in Madrasa by Gender

Student's Perception	Gender		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Mostly Needed	59.68(37)	85.71 (120)	77.72 (157)
Needed	24.19 (15)	11.43(16)	15.35 (31)
As usual	14.52(9)	2.14 (3)	5.94 (12)
Good	1.61 (1)	0.72 (1)	0.99 (2)
Total	100.00(62)	100.00(140)	100.00(202)

Note. χ^2 test p- value sex = .000

Student's Perception on the Mainstream Curriculum Subjects in Madrasa by Age Group

Students' perceptions of the mainstream curriculum subjects in Madrasas demonstrate a consistent outlook across different age groups. Both students aged 16 or older and those under 16 largely agree on the significance of these subjects for their future career paths. Specifically, 77.14 percent of students aged 16 or older and 78.35 percent of students under 16 perceive mainstream subjects as "most needed" for their future path (Cohen et al., 2002). Despite the potential for age-related differences, the study found no statistically significant variation in the perception of mainstream subjects between these age groups.

statistical analysis, which indicates a meaningful association between gender and how students rate the importance of mainstream subjects, with the differences being significant at the ≤ 0.05 levels (Sikand, 2005).

These results suggest that female students are more likely to value mainstream subjects as essential for their future career paths compared to male students. This could reflect differences in career aspirations, societal expectations, or access to opportunities, which might influence how each gender perceives the role of secular education in Madrasas. As education policies continue to evolve, understanding these gender-based perceptions can help in tailoring educational reforms to better meet the needs of both male and female students in Madrasas (Rafiq, 2013).

This convergence in perspectives highlights a common recognition among students, regardless of age, about the essential role of mainstream curriculum subjects in shaping their futures. The lack of a statistically significant association between age and the perception of these subjects indicates that other factors, such as gender, might have a more pronounced influence on how students value their curriculum. Therefore, while age does not seem to impact students' views on the importance of these subjects, educational reforms should still consider the overall high level of importance students across all age groups assign to mainstream subjects in Madrasas (Rafiq, 2013).

Table 4*Student's Perception on the Mainstream Curriculum Subjects in Madrasa by Age*

Student's Perception	Age in Years		Total
	Less Than 16	16 and Above	
Mostly Needed	78.35 (76)	77.14 (81)	77.72 (157)
Needed	15.46 (15)	15.23 (16)	15.35 (31)
As usual	4.12 (4)	7.62(8)	5.94 (12)
Good	2.07 (2)	0.01 (0)	0.99 (2)
Total	100.00(97)	100.00(105)	100.00(202)

Note. χ^2 test p- value age= .360

Students' aims after Study Mainstream Curriculum Subjects by Gender

Students' aspirations after studying mainstream curriculum subjects in Madrasas reveal significant gender-based differences in career goals. According to the Yadav (2024), 28.5 percent of the total respondents expressed a desire to pursue government jobs, 39.5 percent aimed to teach in Madrasas, and 10.5 percent considered moving abroad. However, when these aspirations are analyzed by gender, clear distinctions emerge (Rafiq, 2013).

Among female students, 24.46 percent indicated a preference for government jobs, 44.60 percent aspired to teach in Madrasas, and only 4.32 percent considered moving abroad. This suggests that female students tend to prioritize careers within the Madrasa education system, perhaps due to cultural or societal factors that emphasize religious and community-based roles for women (Pathan &

Mujawar, 2012). Conversely, male students showed a broader range of career ambitions. A higher proportion of boys (37.70%) aimed for government jobs, while 26.23 percent expressed interest in teaching in Madrasas. Notably, 24.59 percent of male students were interested in opportunities abroad, indicating a greater inclination among males to explore international career pathways (Rafiq, 2013).

These gender-based differences in career aspirations suggest that male students may perceive the mainstream curriculum as a stepping stone towards diverse career opportunities, including governmental positions and international work, while female students appear to focus more on religious education roles within their communities. These insights could inform educational policies and career guidance, ensuring that students of both genders are supported in pursuing their desired pathways after completing their studies.

Table 5*Student's Perception on the Mainstream Curriculum Subjects in Madrasa by Age*

Student's Perception	Gender		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Government job	37.70(23)	24.46(34)	28.5(57)
Teaching in Madrasa	26.23(16)	44.60(62)	39.0(78)
Abroad	24.59(15)	04.32(06)	10.5(21)
Others	11.47(07)	26.62(37)	22.0(44)
Total	100.0(61)	100.0(139)	100.0(200)

Note. χ^2 test p- value sex = .000

Students' Sims After Study Mainstream Curriculum Subjects by Age

This study explored students' aspirations after completing mainstream curriculum subjects, focusing on goals such as government jobs, teaching in Madrasas, opportunities abroad, and other pathways. It aimed to uncover the motivations influencing their choices and implications for educational policies and career guidance.

Findings revealed distinct preferences based on age: 29.52 percent of older students aimed for government jobs compared to 27.37 percent

of younger students. Teaching in Madrasas was preferred by 13.33 percent of older students and 30.52 percent of younger students. These age-based differences highlight the need for tailored educational and career guidance programs.

Statistical analysis confirmed significant associations between students' aspirations, gender, and age, emphasizing the importance of addressing these factors in educational and career counseling. This supports the development of more effective strategies for curriculum planning and guidance programs.

Table 6

Student's Perception on the Mainstream Curriculum Subjects in Madrasa by Age

Student's Perception	Age in Years		Total
	Less Than 16	16 and Above	
Government job	27.37(26)	29.52(31)	28.5(57)
Teaching in Madrasa	30.52(29)	46.67(49)	39.0(78)
Abroad	70.37(07)	13.33(14)	10.5(21)
Others	34.74(33)	10.48(11)	22.0(44)
Total	100.0(95)	100.0(105)	100.0(200)

Note. χ^2 test p- value age= .000

Moreover, the findings align with prior research emphasizing the critical importance of gender considerations in education systems undergoing reform or integration (Sikand, 2005). In the specific context of Nepal's Madrasa system, incorporating gender-responsive pedagogy and support mechanisms is essential to fully realize the potential of mainstream curriculum inclusion.

Conclusion

This study underscores that gender exerts a more profound influence than age on students' perceptions and aspirations concerning mainstream curriculum subjects within the Madrasa education system. While both demographic factors affect students' career ambitions following their engagement with subjects such as Science, Mathematics, and English, the evidence clearly indicates that gender-specific dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping these educational outcomes.

Female students tend to express particular preferences and motivations that differ markedly from their male counterparts, highlighting the necessity for nuanced approaches in educational planning and resource allocation.

This gender disparity in perceptions and aspirations calls for targeted strategies in curriculum development that are sensitive to the distinct needs, interests, and socio-cultural contexts of male and female Madrasa students. Tailored career counseling services should also reflect these differences to effectively guide students toward viable and fulfilling career paths, thus enhancing motivation and decreasing dropout rates.

Ultimately, fostering gender equity in educational content delivery and career guidance within Madrasas will contribute not only to individual student success but also to broader socio-economic development by empowering

a more diverse and capable future workforce. Continued research and policy attention are warranted to monitor the effectiveness of gender-sensitive interventions and to ensure that reforms in the Madrasa education system are both inclusive and impactful.

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