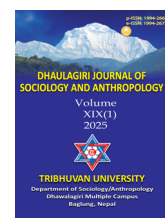


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Exploring Informal Social Institutions Supporting Informal Skills Learning

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Abstract

This study examines the role of informal social institutions in facilitating informal skills learning within the informal work settings of Nepal, an area that remains underexplored in the current literature. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of [Coleman's \(1988\)](#) social capital and [Lave and Wenger's \(1991\)](#) situated learning, the research highlights how family and senior artisans as gurus, workplace dynamics, social networks, and cultural practices significantly influence the learning pathways and employment outcomes of informal learners, who are predominantly from vulnerable groups and typically exit formal education early. Using in-depth conversational interviews (Kurakani) and work observations with 14 research participants, the study focuses on four key sectors—pottery, metalcrafts, fast food, and two-wheeler mechanics. It illuminates the crucial yet often less visible support these institutions provide. In these settings, culture functions as a holistic system, where shared values, beliefs, and traditions (including religious norms) shape not only the skills that are transmitted but also the methods and meanings of learning itself. The findings advocate for policies that acknowledge and integrate the dynamics of informal social institutions to enhance the effectiveness of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs in developing contexts like Nepal. The insights derived not only contribute to academic discourse but also offer practical implications for policymakers and educators aiming to optimize TVET strategies to better serve marginalized populations.

Keywords: informal skills learners, informal social institution, informal work setting, social capital, workplace learning

Introduction

Workplace learning is a highly researched area today. A considerable amount of literature exists on institutions facilitating workplace learning, but most of this literature emphasizes formal TVET programs and institutions associated with general education ([Gessler et al., 2019](#); [Rauner & Maclean, 2009](#)). While there is abundant knowledge on informal workplace learning, a noticeable gap remains in the literature specifically addressing informal work settings, despite this body of work having

grown considerably over the past few decades ([Le Clus, 2011](#)). In simpler terms, there is limited literature on informal institutions that play a role in informal skills learning and development ([Hillenkamp et al., 2013](#); [Jutting et al., 2007](#)).

Informal skills learning refers to the process of acquiring knowledge and skills in informal work settings, where learners navigate a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors. To understand how skills are learned in informal settings, it is essential to investigate informal social institutions that exist in this sector. By giving underprivileged groups who cannot



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afford formal education access to learning and occupational development opportunities, these institutions help close skills gaps. Similarly, by passing down traditional knowledge and skills, informal social institutions also help to preserve cultural practices. Governments can validate skills learned informally and facilitate easier transitions into formal employment by incorporating these informal systems into more comprehensive educational policies. Therefore, this research is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, employing a qualitative approach to deeply explore the informal social institutions that shape informal skills learning and career progression.

Since they are ingrained in cultural and social norms, informal social institutions predominate in Nepal's informal skilling process. They offer easily accessible, adaptable, and hands-on learning opportunities to workers who do not have access to formal education and training. Most workers acquire skills informally at work through observation, mentoring, and practical experience—often with the help of family members or senior craftspeople. In contrast to formal TVET systems, which are guided by strict curricula and limited outreach, these institutions are especially effective at meeting the needs of marginalized groups by adjusting to local socioeconomic contexts. The primary locations for skills development of such learners are informal learning spaces such as family workshops, community businesses, and small-scale industries (Baral, 2020).

The study's participants, drawn from four occupational sectors—pottery, metalcrafts, fast food, and two-wheeler mechanics—offer a contextual understanding of these influences. In Nepal, occupations such as pottery, metalcraft, fast food, and two-wheeler mechanics are predominantly informal, as they mostly operate outside formal regulatory frameworks.

The informal institutions include family, gurus or senior artisans, workplace dynamics, social networks, and mediators, which often overlap. Methodologically, the research involved 'kurakani' (informal conversational interviews) (Dhakal, 2021) conducted in natural work settings over fifteen months, and workplace observations, which provided an authentic insight into the lives and learning experiences of the participants.

This methodological decision was made to promote open and natural communication with participants. Therefore, Kurakani sessions, as opposed to conventional structured interviews, were casual and frequently held at the participants' homes or places of employment. This allowed for spontaneous and in-depth conversations regarding their experiences with informal social institutions. The format was purposefully flexible and conversational, encouraging participants to freely share their stories and insights, even though the interviews were pre-scheduled to guarantee participants' availability. By fostering rapport and trust, this method enabled participants to share subtle aspects of their informal learning processes that might have gone

unnoticed in more formal contexts. Using this methodical approach, the study sought to capture the genuine voices and viewpoints of informal skills learners in Nepal.

The study explored different informal social institutions supporting informal skills learning, including: 1) family and senior artisans as gurus, 2) workplace, 3) social networks, 4) cultural and religious institutions, and 5) mediators. These institutions are directly or indirectly related to informal small-scale enterprises.

Characterizing Small-Scale and Family Enterprises as Skills Learning Venue

Informal skills learning predominantly occurs in small-sized enterprises, which serve as the primary learning venues for individuals engaged in informal skills acquisition (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2012). Despite their modest scale, these enterprises engage with a diverse range of people, both within the organization and externally (Gibb, 1997). Learning within these enterprises is shaped by the demands of their clientele, emphasizing a learning approach grounded in trial and error with immediate implications (Jeong et al., 2018).

The familial setting of the small enterprise's work environment is particularly pronounced, especially in traditional occupations where family and business intertwine. This familial setting has been identified as a positive influence on skills learning (Char Fei Ho et al., 2013; Jeong et al., 2018). Small enterprises often exhibit distinct characteristics, including minimal staffing with individuals assuming multiple roles and limited investment in human resources (Jeong et al., 2018). Moreover, the operation of these enterprises is characterized by the efficient utilization of scarce resources (Coetzer et al., 2019).

While informal workplace learning is a ubiquitous phenomenon, the specific context of the predominance of the informal sector, as observed in developing countries like Nepal, imparts unique traits to small enterprises. In such contexts, learning often takes place through an apprentice-like model, where less experienced workers learn from their more skilled counterparts while working (King, 2012; Langer, 2013). Additionally, these environments witness rapid occupational changes, with traditional occupations giving way to contemporary ones that have emerged more recently, as exemplified by shifts among potters in the Indian sub-continent (Pathak, 2016). Regardless of their specific circumstances, small enterprises play a crucial role as training providers for many individuals.

While scholars like Kyndt and Baert (2013) emphasize the impact of enterprise size on skills learning, Bishop (2020) posits that various factors influence skills acquisition and is not solely contingent on enterprise size. Drawing from my own experiences, I align with the perspective of Kyndt and Baert (2013), suggesting that effective learning can thrive even in small organizations. Conversely, it is conceivable that larger organizations may

not always provide ample learning opportunities. In formal vocational workplace training, provisions such as formally appointed instructors and mentors are common (Bahl et al., 2019). However, in the realm of informal workplace learning, these instructional roles are often assumed by senior skilled workers. This distinction is particularly evident in various developing regions, primarily in Sub-Saharan African countries and the global south, where informal workplace learning is prevalent as a means of skills development. Such learning conditions are mostly associated with the vulnerability of workers/skills learners (ILO, 2012). Informal social institutions are also directly or indirectly related to such vulnerability of learners.

Vulnerability of Informal Skills Learners

The vulnerability of informal skills learners is contingent upon various contextual factors, including the country's socio-economic conditions, cultural practices, and the political landscape. Despite variations in these contexts, a shared characteristic among informal workers is their inherent vulnerability compared to those engaged in formal economic sectors. Informal workers operate in challenging conditions and often receive limited attention from the state, making it difficult for them to secure formal employment (Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2004). This challenge is particularly acute in underdeveloped and developing contexts, where individuals often rely on social networks or the assistance of formal and informal intermediaries, whether individuals or institutions, to secure employment opportunities (Von Kotze, 2013; Walther, 2007; Yunus, 2020). Consequently, they grapple with poverty, struggling to meet their basic needs with insufficient attention to learning (World Bank, 2018).

This precarious situation intensifies the vulnerability of informal skills learners, leading to frequent job searches and occupational changes. Educational opportunities also play a role in this dynamic. In the Nepalese metalcrafts sector, for instance, a significant shift from traditional to non-traditional occupations is seen as an opportunity seized by traditional caste groups (Nepali, 1959; Slusser, 1982). While the choice of occupation is an individual right, especially in Nepal (GoN, 2015), a widespread shift in occupations poses challenges. Issues such as the low participation by vulnerable groups, including women, in non-traditional occupations, contribute to the complexity of this situation.

Additionally, Upadhyaya (1987) contends that engagement in blue-collar jobs often stems from personal compulsion. However, it is crucial to recognize that informal work is not invariably a second-tier choice. In some instances, individuals willingly opt for such jobs (Gunther & Launov, 2012), highlighting the importance of personal agency and choice in the learning process. The willingness to engage in informal work voluntarily underscores the essential role of individual agency in shaping the trajectory of skills acquisition, whether through

formal or informal means. Informal workplace learning and occupational progression are associated with multiple invisible or less visible actors, which can be considered informal social institutions.

Social Institutions in Informal Workplace Learning: A Literature Review

Defining social institutions poses a challenge, with diverse definitions and debates among scholars (Hodgson, 2006; Jutting et al., 2007; Scott, 2014). North (1990) conceptualizes institutions as the "rules of the game in a society" (p. 3), while Renold et al. (2019) define them as "relatively stable patterns of behavior or joint action that help overcome fundamental problems and function in society" (p. 1). For the context of informal skills learning, Soysa and Jutting (2006) provide a practical definition, which encompasses formal rules and regulations along with informal norms, values, and practices.

In the sphere of workplace learning literature, there is a substantial focus on social institutions within the TVET field, primarily emphasizing formal education and training (Gessler et al., 2019; Rauner & Maclean, 2009). However, there is a noticeable scarcity of literature pertaining specifically to informal skills learning. Instead, a considerable body of literature addresses informal economic institutions. Certain studies in the available literature delve into the cultural practices of Nepal, exploring aspects such as the country's religious diversity and coherence (Bhattarai, 2008), the historical significance of Gurukuls as educational institutions (Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development [CERID], 2007), and the undervaluation of informally acquired skills (Parajuli, 2014).

Moreover, the literature highlights the significance of social relations and linkages as social institutions that individuals utilize for various work and learning-related needs (Brook, 2005). Informal skills learners often rely on such informal institutions for job acquisition and career progression (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Coleman, 1988). Family connections also play a role, as individuals seek support within their family businesses (Curran & Blackburn, 2001). Additionally, informal skills learners may leverage intermediary institutions or seek assistance from individuals to secure employment (Standing, 2011). Despite their evident importance, these social institutions are often unrecognized and unsupported by the National TVET system of Nepal.

Although Nepal has made progress in acknowledging lifelong learning through programs like the National Skill Testing Board and the National Qualifications Framework, informal learning is still largely isolated from state-led systems (Regmi, 2020). With its roots in social institutions and cultural practices, informal skills learning takes place outside of formal frameworks and depends on community-based interactions, mentorship, and observation. This disconnect occurs because state-

led systems place a higher priority on formal education and certification procedures, thereby undervaluing the practical knowledge and competencies gained through informal means. For example, informal learning outcomes, like those from traditional apprenticeships or workplace-based learning, are rarely validated or incorporated into national frameworks, even though policies recognize non-formal learning to some degree. This exclusion restricts the recognition and employability of informal learners, leaving them detached from broader educational reforms aimed at fostering lifelong learning in Nepal (Regmi, 2020).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, positioned within the interpretive paradigm. The study involves 14 research participants (as provided in Table 1) selected from four occupational sectors: pottery, metalcrafts, cafeteria, and two-wheeler mechanics¹. These participants were chosen based on their experience in the informal work sector.

Data were collected through an informal conversational interview method known as 'kurakani,' (Dhakal, 2021) which involves conversational interviews in natural work settings. The fieldwork spanned fifteen months, from September 2018 to November 2019. Interviews and observations were conducted during the participants' extended work hours, providing insights into their experiences. The data gathered from interviews and observations were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti (version 8). The analysis focused on identifying themes related to the types of informal social institutions that influence the learning of informal skills learners.

Efforts were made to minimize work interruptions for the research participants during interviews and observations and to ensure that participation did not exacerbate their vulnerabilities. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants.

Recognizing Informal Social Institutions Associated with Informal Skills Learning

This section presents the information obtained from the field based on the themes generated during the two phases of data analysis. As provided in Table 2, these identified informal social institutions contributing to informal skills learning are: 1) family and senior artisans as gurus, 2) workplace, 3) social networks, 4) cultural and religious institutions, and 5) mediators. For this, the primary lens for examining these institutions is whether they are "enabling effective learning" (Evans, 2006). In other words, whether these institutions are 'helping' (Jutting et al., 2007) in the informal skills learning and development process. I have

explored such 'helping' influences of the institutions in three stages: obtaining a job, performing the job, and further learning and career progression. This means that learners solve their "fundamental problems" (Renold et al., 2019, p. 36) with the help of these institutions. However, drawing lines between these stages is not apparent.

Table 1

Brief Information of the Research Participants

| Occupation | No. of re-search participants | Name (Gender/Age group) (Note: Gender: M= male, F= female) |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Pottery | 3 | Lambodar (M/55), Damodar (M/35), Indralaxmi (F/30) |
| Metalcrafts | 4 | Yuvaraj (M/50), Amod (M/45), Gaurav (M/30), Jiwa (M/25) |
| Cafeteria | 3 | Swarupa (45), Ramila (F/40), Chandrika (F/25) |
| Two-wheeler workshop | 4 | Ratna (M/45), Dinesh (M/40), Suraj (M/25), Sanju (M/20) |

Family and Senior Artisans as Guru as an Informal Social Institution

The family assumes a pivotal role in the informal skills learning process, particularly influencing job acquisition, work performance, skills learning, and further career progression. For example, in traditional occupations, religious rituals and festivals (such as Guthi practices or Bishwakarma Pooja) directly influence the skills valued, the methods of acquisition, and the social significance of work. This influence is particularly pronounced in traditional occupations, such as pottery, where the family often serves as a job-providing institution.

In this context, the family's significance is high due to the minimal penetration of individuals from other social groups. Binayak, a potter guardian, experiences that individuals within the pottery community "don't have to struggle to get a job, and just have to have the willingness to continue the work that elders did". This highlights the seamless transition of employment within the family without the need for external job searches.

In the metal arts and crafts sector, family influence is evident through practitioners like Amod, a senior metal artist, and Jiwa, a young artist who entered the occupation from outside the traditional community. However, many participants, including the Shaky family members (Yuvaraj, a renowned metal artist and his artisan son

1. Information used in this research is obtained during my PhD research project titled "Informal Skills Learning: A Case Study of Small-Sized Enterprises in Nepal" (Baral, 2022).

Gaurav), obtained from families deeply rooted in metal arts and crafts. Gaurav's alignment with the family trade after completing higher secondary level, despite not pursuing higher education, underscores the enduring influence of family in shaping occupational choices. During one conversation, Gaurav mentioned:

I am aligned in this field as my ancestors were doing the same occupation. Although I was not good at education, I was able to complete only 12 grades. Although I met the course duration of a bachelor's level, I could not clear (pass) it. I have been aligned in this field after my SLC². From SLC to the bachelor's level, I already had five years of work experience. When I left my education, I was fully aligned with this occupation.

Despite the contemporary trend of young people diverging from traditional occupations, Gaurav's decision to follow in the family trade exemplifies the enduring role of family. Traditional Newar families, such as the Prajapati families in pottery and the Shakya families in metal arts and crafts, maintain a historical attachment to their occupational groups (Bonapace & Sestini, 2003). Adhikary (2005) notes that informal learning remains a prevalent mode for most youth, with families playing a pivotal role in facilitating jobs in traditional occupations.

Beyond job provision, the family's role extends to work performance and learning in all studied occupations. In pottery, the family and workplace are intertwined, while in metalcrafts, there is a relative separation. Jiwa, the young metal artist, emphasizes the importance of family support for his performance, noting that he would not achieve progress without their encouragement.

In small enterprises, a common characteristic of this research is the evident presence of family involvement. The presence of family members, such as Ratna's (a senior mechanics and motorcycle workshop owner) wife supervising the cleaning of a motorcycle workshop, exemplifies the familial contribution to work performance. My field note captured:

When I asked where Ratna was and whether he would come to the workshop, she informed me that Ratna had gone out early in the morning for different work and would not be coming today. She said that she came there to ensure whether the boys workers bathe and clean. She also said that first they clean the workshop area, and then they will do their cleaning.

Family businesses, characterized by shared goals and complementary skills within the family and friends' network, demonstrate the high impact of family contributions in running the work smoothly and facilitating skills learning (Curran & Blackburn, 2001). Thus, the family's role extends beyond job provision, influencing work performance and skills learning, underscoring its crucial contribution to the dynamics of small-sized enterprises.

Table 2

Informal Institutions Contributing to Different Stages of Informal Skills Learning

| S. No. | Informal, supportive social institution | Getting Job | Performing work and learning | Further learning and career progression |
|--------|---|-------------|------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Family and senior artisans as gurus | x | x | |
| 2 | Workplace | | x | x |
| 3 | Social network | x | | x |
| 4 | Cultural and Religious institutions | | x | |
| 5 | Mediators | x | | |

The significance of gurus and senior artisans as informal social institutions in shaping the trajectory of informal skills learners is evident in the research findings. In occupations like metalcrafts and two-wheeler workshops, the term 'guru' holds profound meaning, reflecting the mentorship and guidance provided by experienced individuals. In the sector of pottery, Damodar, referring to his father Lambodar as his guru, emphasizes the transmission of skills from one generation to another, highlighting the non-documentary nature of these skills and their crucial role in career progression. He once mentioned:

My father taught me the skills. He learned these skills with his elder brother as my grandfather passed away at an early age when my father was six months old. Thus, skills are being passed from one generation to the next. Such taught skills are the basis of our career progression.

This intergenerational knowledge transfer is a cornerstone in the pottery sector, with Damodar, in turn, becoming a guru for his wife, Indralaxmi, illustrating the cyclical nature of informal skills learning within families.

Metalcrafts, too, showcase the mentor-disciple dynamic, with Gaurav considering his father, Yuvaraj, as his guru and acknowledging his role in organizing informal training that benefitted numerous metal artists and craftspeople. The concept of Gurukul, historically rooted in Nepal, resonates in the occupational world, signifying learning under the direct guidance of a guru or skilled instructor. These informal learning places, similar to skill-related Gurukuls, function as informal apprenticeships, fostering skill development and occupational success (CERID, 2007; ILO, 2012). The network of experienced artisans and gurus forms an invaluable informal institution contributing to the production of culturally trained, skilled human resources, surpassing the influence of formal educational systems (Kim & McLean, 2014).

The nexus of gurus and learners, often enterprise

owners with sterling reputations in their respective trade communities, adds to the informal institutional fabric, with their cultural influence outshining that of formal teachers and vocational instructors. This cultural resonance, inherent in informal skills learning, highlights the need to indigenize foreign theories and practices for adult education and workplace learning instructors, as noted by [Kim and McLean \(2014\)](#).

Workplace as an Informal Social Institution

The workplace emerges as a pivotal social institution in supporting informal skills learners across various stages of their careers, encompassing job execution, skills acquisition, and career advancement. The supportive and familial nature of Nepali workplaces reflects the wider cultural and religious values of mutual support and respect, which are reinforced through daily rituals and collective practices. This role is particularly evident in the execution of work and the learning process, with the workplace environment serving as a primary motivator for skills acquisition. Organizational factors underscore the workplace's impact on motivating a worker's learning journey.

In pottery workshops, the immersion of potters in their work process serves as a motivational element. Damodar, a young potter, and Indralaxmi (Damodar's wife) highlight the family environment and flexibility of their work nature as significant sources of motivation. Similarly, in the metal arts and crafts sector, Jiwa, Amod, and Gaurav emphasize the importance of a harmonious workplace environment that supports their work. Gaurav, for instance, focuses on specific aspects of art, such as drawing patterns and working on smaller statues, and acknowledges the supportive nature of his workplace for skill development. When I was asking the metal artists about what their role is, one of the artists, Gaurav, mentioned:

I still have a lot to learn about design. The work environment here is favorable for my skills learning. I am also working on large art pieces. However, it requires skills that my workplace does not support. Currently, I am learning to create cost estimates for large sculptures from my colleagues.

The motorcycle workshop and fast-food industry participants also acknowledge the workplace as a supporting institution for work performance. Sanju, a junior motorcycle workshop worker from the Tarai region, considers the workshop and his owner's residence akin to his family, underscoring the familial and supportive atmosphere. In the fast-food industry, workers view their owners, Swarupa and Ramila (workers in the cafeteria), not merely as a superior but as a mentor and guardian. Chandrika, a cafeteria worker, perceives the workplace as a familial environment, emphasizing the cordial relationships that contribute to motivation.

Moreover, the workplace extends its influence on support workers by enhancing their skills and facilitating

career progression. Jiwa and Gaurav, metal artists, face the continuous challenge of continually improving and acquiring new skills in the workplace. The workplace environment encourages further career progression by offering opportunities for ongoing learning. This study also examines how informal skills learners acquire skills in two-wheeler workshops. The case of Sanju highlights how skills learned in one workplace can propel a worker to a better job opportunity, showcasing the pivotal role of the workplace in career advancement.

Chandrika, a young lady from the fast-food industry, exemplified how the workplace contributes to career progression by providing networking opportunities. Beyond skills acquired at work, she emphasizes how the workplace facilitates introductions to various people, enabling her to receive support for enrolling in a bachelor's level course and continuing it.

In conclusion, workplaces function as informal training-providing institutions. The characteristic of being informal apprentices, even in smaller enterprises, underscores the critical role of workplaces in shaping the learning experiences of informal skills learners.

Social Network as Informal Social Institution

The prevalent influence of social networks as informal institutions in the realm of informal skills learning and career progression is evident in various occupational sectors. The pottery occupation, rooted in traditional practices, exhibits less reliance on external networks for job acquisition. In contrast, other sectors, such as metal arts and crafts and two-wheeler mechanics, showcase the growing importance of social connections. Yuvaraj, a senior metal artist, noted the increasing involvement of individuals from non-traditional occupational caste communities, emphasizing the role of friends' and relatives' networks in facilitating initial job opportunities for newcomers. In the metalcrafts sector, Jiwa's narrative resonates with this theme as his decision to enter Kathmandu and secure a job was spurred by the support and assurance offered by a distant aunt, a part of his family's network. Once he mentioned:

When it became difficult to continue my education, I dropped out and returned home. Meanwhile, one distant Aunt came from Kathmandu. [...] She told me that her daughter and daughter-in-law are in Kathmandu, who can help me get a job at their place. She also said to me that I will work and learn skills and will be able to earn money in the future. I was convinced by the version of Aunt, and thus I entered Kathmandu.

The two-wheeler mechanics sector also illustrates the significance of social networks in job identification. Ratna and Dinesh, owners of motorcycle workshops, both acknowledge the role of relatives' networks in their initial job placements. Ratna's first job opportunity was facilitated through a relative's network, and Dinesh received support from a former colleague who helped him secure a job in Kathmandu. The Journey of Suraj, a young mechanic

learner who came from the Tarai to Kathmandu for work, was influenced by his maternal uncle, emphasizing the interconnectedness of social networks and job opportunities. Suraj once shared:

My Mama (maternal uncle) helped me get a job in Kathmandu...He convinced me that there is a good income in Kathmandu. He also shared that he has sent other boys to Kathmandu from the village, who are doing well and helping the family financially. I accepted his proposal and moved to Kathmandu.

In the fast-food sector, the reliance on social networks is equally evident. Ramila's entry into the workforce in Kathmandu was facilitated by a connection from her maternal village, highlighting the role of known persons in securing job opportunities. Chandrika, another fast-food worker, leveraged her familial network, with her mother's support and the café owner, Swarupa, playing pivotal roles in securing her job. This reliance on social networks aligns with the challenges faced by vulnerable individuals in the informal sector, where limited educational qualifications and job-searching skills necessitate support from experienced connections (Von Kotze, 2013; Walther, 2007).

The significance of social networks extends beyond job acquisition to encompass learning and career development. Amod and Jiwa's experiences in metalcrafts highlight how friends and relatives contribute to career progression. Jiwa's decision to re-enter the occupation was guided by a friend, demonstrating the influential role of social connections in steering career paths. Similarly, Amod's journey from being a practitioner of metal art to a managerial position in an industry was shaped by the support and guidance of his relative, Yuvaraj. Dinesh's success story further highlights how the social network established during his initial work period continues to support his growth and business endeavors in the automobile sector.

These social networks are embedded within cultural and religious frameworks where commitments of kinship and community facilitate both job access and skill transmission. The social network's role in informal skills learners' lives aligns with international perspectives on the importance of social capital. Scholars have noted that social capital, characterized by mutual trust and reciprocal benefits within networks, is integral to both human capital (skills and knowledge) and cooperation in contemporary employment contexts (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Coleman, 1988; Brook, 2005). The emphasis on social capital recognizes that informal skills learners, contributing significantly to national production, benefit from strengthened social networks for improved support and opportunities.

Cultural and Religious Organizations as Informal Social Institutions

Cultural and religious institutions play a crucial role in shaping the landscape of informal skills learning,

particularly in traditional occupations. The creation of ritual items, participation in festivals, and observation of workplace rituals demonstrate how culture and religion are inseparable from skill learning, illustrating the holistic integration of economic, spiritual, and social life. The pottery occupation, deeply intertwined with cultural artifacts, sees the influence of cultural and religious practices in the selection and production of specific pottery items. Lambodar, a potter guardian, emphasized the connection between their work and religion, highlighting how certain pottery items are crafted during specific festivals as per traditional Guthi³ practices, which are still informal. Damodar, a young potter, expressed concern about the decline in demand for cultural pottery utensils due to the substitution by metallic and plastic alternatives, signalling the challenges faced by traditional artisans.

In the metal arts and crafts sector, religion and culture are integral prerequisites for artistic endeavors. Amod, a senior artist, emphasized the inseparable link between their work and religion, culture, and lifestyle. For him, every created item holds meaning, symbolizing aspects of power and reflecting the close relationship between arts and religion. Regarding this once he mentioned:

In reality, our work is never accomplished without three things: religion, culture, and lifestyle. Traditional arts are not only arts for art but also associated with religion. Here, in our workshop, what we create, each item has its meaning. For instance, sitting Garuda, nose of the God, Lion, Elephant; all have cultural meaning.

The Newari arts and skills in Kathmandu Valley, according to Amod, are intricately associated with Hinduism and Buddhism, mirroring the interconnectedness of arts and religion. This aligns with Banerjee's assertion that highlights the intertwining of traditional arts and religious practices (Banerjee, 1972).

Cultural and religious institutions also shape the practices and celebrations within the two-wheeler mechanics occupation. The observed sorting of old dismantled parts by worker-boys in Dinesh's motorcycle workshop was not merely a utilitarian task but an eagerly awaited cultural event tied to the Bishwakarma Pooja festival. The boys engaged in this activity to generate income for the festival, showcasing the fusion of work, cultural festivities, and economic endeavours. Regarding this, my field note captured:

"What are you doing *Bhai ho* [Brothers]?" I asked a question in the group. Sanju said, "We are sorting the parts (which will) sell to *Kawadi*. We can make money from this and will use that money during the festival." "Is it during Bishwakarma⁴ Pooja?" I asked Raju. "Yes, but this puja happens during Dashain, Uncle! At that time, we will be fully relaxed and will also enjoy *Daru-Pani*⁵. It will be a very joyful uncle!" shared Sanju with

3. Traditional community association

4. God of engineering

5 Alcoholic drink in their mother tongue, Maithili

smiles.

The variation in the observance of the Bishwakarma Pooja festival among workshops, depending on the owners' cultural backgrounds, illustrates how cultural practices permeate the work environment of informal skills learners.

The intertwining of religion, culture, and work is a pervasive phenomenon in Nepali society. The cultural practices of burning incense sticks and praying to gods before commencing work, observed across various occupations, highlight the deep connection between spirituality and the working environment (Bhattarai, 2008). Senior artists in the metal arts and crafts sector emphasize that their work is directly related to Buddhist philosophy, indicating the broader cultural and spiritual dimensions influencing the sector's practices (Furger, 2017).

The role of cultural and religious institutions extends beyond mere rituals, impacting the very fabric of informal work-settings and learning environments. Adult learners, rooted in spiritual traditions, often find spirituality to be an integral part of their lives, contributing to the maintenance of a conducive learning environment (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). In essence, informal skills learning is intricately interwoven with informal cultural and religious institutions, shaping the culture of traditional occupations in Nepal.

Mediators as Informal Social Institutions

Mediators emerge as pivotal figures within the informal occupational sectors, playing a crucial role in connecting job seekers with employment opportunities. These mediators often operate within caste and religious community networks, demonstrating how skill development and job placement are rooted in broader cultural and spiritual systems. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the metalcrafts and two-wheeler mechanical workshops, where the involvement of mediators, including relatives, friends, and specific networks, is prevalent. Despite shifts in the nature of traditional occupational castes and their engagement in metalcrafts, the role of mediators persists. Yuvaraj, the owner of a metal arts and crafts enterprise, shed light on the dynamics, stating that groups from villages establish small workshops, acting both as skills providers for rural youth and as informal human resource suppliers to larger firms. Upon my question, whether they have contact people who supply required workers, Yuvaraj, a metalcraft company owner, mentioned:

Rather than saying contact people, many groups come from the villages and open and run their own small *Jyasa*⁶. Such groups act as both skills providers for rural youth and human resource suppliers to more prominent firms. We do meet from time to time [with those workers]. They [who are skilled] request us for the work stating, "Let give the work us too!"

In the two-wheeler workshops sector, where individuals

primarily from the Tarai region are employed, mediators play a crucial role in worker recruitment. Dinesh and Ratna, owners of motorcycle workshops, highlighted that worker supply is often facilitated through known individuals, such as "Kawadi" (Recycle material collectors) people or those within the motorcycle mechanics community. These mediators act as intermediaries, receiving descriptions of required skills from workshop owners and supplying workers accordingly, often charging a fee of 2,000-3,000 Rupees per worker. Ratna pointed out the high turnover of workers due to poaching practices, where mediators contribute to the mobility of workers between different workplaces.

While the term 'mediator' is commonly used to describe those facilitating job connections, in the realm of human resource development, the term 'broker' is more prevalent. These brokers, ranging from informal to formally registered firms, are integral to the labor process, helping firms transition faster to temporary employment arrangements (Standing, 2011). In contexts where informality prevails, labor intermediaries operate across a spectrum, from informal to formal, supplying individuals to the labor market (Yunus, 2020). In Nepal and similar labor market situations, these mediators, though not exclusively working in favor of informal skills learners, are significant players shaping the dynamics of informal employment and supporting small-sized, less-formal enterprises.

Utilizing Informal Social Institutions: A Social Capital Perspective

This study emphasizes how important informal social institutions—such as families, workplaces, social networks, cultural and religious institutions, and mediators—are in determining how informal skills learners develop their careers. Accessible, flexible, and in line with the sociocultural realities of Nepal's informal economy, which employs more than 80% of the workforce, these institutions are more common than formal state-led mechanisms (Baral, 2020). This discussion highlights these institutions' contributions to employability and skill development by placing them within the larger context of social capital. As the fundamental pillars of social capital, families and senior craftspeople offer employment opportunities and settings for traditional apprenticeships that facilitate the transfer of skills between generations (Coleman, 1988). For example, senior craftspeople serve as gurus in fields like metalcrafts and pottery, imparting skills to younger generations through practical experience.

This study shows that informal skills learning in Nepal is fundamentally shaped by the holistic integration of culture, religious belief, and social practice. Skills are transferred and valued not only for economic reasons but also for fulfilling cultural and spiritual roles within the community. Informal sector workplaces operate as "Communities of Practice," where learning is ingrained in day-to-day interactions and activities (Lave &

6. A small workshop generally at the home of occupational caste people.

Wenger, 1991). Through observation and cooperation with peers or superiors, workers gain practical skills. While adjusting to the contemporary competencies needed by changing industries, these settings permit the continuation of traditional skills. Informal workplaces encourage experiential learning that is customized to each worker's needs, in contrast to formal TVET systems that emphasize structured curricula. They are essential for skill development in the informal economy because of their adaptability (Baral, 2020). Additionally, social networks are essential because they serve as venues for the creation of opportunities, linking unofficial learners to mentorship and employment opportunities. By utilizing trust-based connections, informal relationships within communities frequently aid in employment and career advancement (Coleman, 1988).

Learning skills informally is significantly sustained by cultural and religious institutions. Gurukuls, for instance, have long been hubs for culturally-based, holistic education. Similarly, festivals and customs offer chances for people to pick up informal skills like event planning or crafting. These organizations support cooperative learning by fostering trust-based environments, which is consistent with Coleman's (1988) framework. Their contributions are still unacknowledged, though, in TVET policies, even though they are crucial for maintaining cultural heritage and encouraging lifelong learning. Informal brokers and other intermediaries link learners of informal skills with training materials or job openings. In industries like construction or handicrafts, they serve as a bridge between employers and employees, negotiating terms on their behalf and removing structural obstacles like formal recognition or certification (Baral, 2020).

Because of their capacity to address the socioeconomic realities of marginalized groups, these informal social institutions have a greater influence than formal ones. In contrast to formal structures, informal institutions make use of experiential learning methods and relationships based on trust, which are consistent with Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital. Nepal and other countries with similar socio-economic conditions can improve employability and inclusivity for their sizable informal workforce by bridging the gap between formal and informal systems and incorporating these institutions into national policies like Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). According to this study, TVET policies should recognise the role that informal social institutions play in helping learners of informal skills advance their careers at various stages. The promotion of inclusive development and the maintenance of sustainable livelihoods in a socioeconomic context depend on acknowledging these institutions within a larger framework of social capital.

Conclusion

The paper has revealed the pivotal role of informal social institutions in shaping informal skills learning among vulnerable groups in Nepal. These invisible, interwoven, and overlapped institutions provide crucial support, enhancing learners' opportunities for skill acquisition and employment. This support is vital for bridging the gap left by early school dropouts and for aiding their navigation through the socio-economic challenges they face.

The paper also underscores the necessity for governance that is sensitive to the realities of informal skills learners. Current policy frameworks and governance mechanisms overlook the contributions and needs of informal learners, thus missing opportunities to harness their potential. Integrating an understanding of these informal institutions into policy design and implementation could lead to more inclusive and effective strategies, promoting equitable access to learning opportunities and sustainable employment. Future interventions should consider these informal mechanisms as integral to the educational and training landscapes, especially in under-resourced contexts.

Declaration

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

I conducted this study independently as a part of my PhD research. Before conducting interviews, I obtained consent from all participants.

Consent for Publication

Not Applicable

Availability of Data and Materials

Data can be shared

Competing Interests

There are no competing interests in this study.

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Authors' Contributions

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