



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG GORKHA YOUTH: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Gorkha (Nepali-speaking) youth in rural Darjeeling navigate complex cultural identities shaped by historical marginalization and modern education. This conceptual review synthesizes literature on experiential learning and identity development to explore how culturally responsive pedagogy can strengthen Gorkha students' cultural identity. Drawing on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, Erikson's psychosocial identity framework, and principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, we propose that engaging adolescents in hands-on cultural experiences (festivals, language, arts, community projects) fosters reflective understanding and identity consolidation. A qualitative review of peer-reviewed studies (including research on indigenous and Himalayan contexts) suggests that immersive cultural programs enhance ethnic self-understanding and well-being. Conceptual framework linking culturally grounded experiences, pedagogical support, and identity outcomes has been proposed. Though community problem-solving may emerge as a byproduct, the focus remains on internalizing cultural knowledge. Implications include integrating local traditions into curricula, teacher training in cultural responsiveness, and further empirical study of experiential interventions in Gorkha contexts.

Keywords: *Experiential Learning, Cultural Identity Development, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Curricula*

Introduction

The Nepali-speaking Gorkha community in the Darjeeling hills occupies a distinctive position in India's socio-cultural landscape. Despite contributing significantly to the region through labour, military service, and cultural life, the community has long faced a crisis of recognition and belonging (Golay, 2006; Shah, 2018). Colonial-era labels (e.g. "Gorkha," "Gorkhali," "Indian Nepali") fostered a persistent sense of an "identity crisis" among Gorkhas (Golay, 2006). Movements for a separate Gorkhaland state reflect this collective quest for cultural affirmation and political legitimacy (Golay, 2006; Smith & Gergan, 2015). Gorkha youth often negotiate their identities through education: studies in Darjeeling show young people using schooling to develop ethnic identities and articulate views on regional politics (Scrase, Ganguly-Scrase, & Deuchar, 2016). At the same time, local cultural norms for example, a strong tradition of Lahure (military) careers can divert adolescents from formal schooling, affecting educational outcomes (Gurung, 2023). These dynamics highlight how culturally rooted practices shape learning trajectories.

In this context, there is a need of pedagogical innovation to help Darjeeling's Gorkha adolescents integrate their heritage with education. Experiential learning which emphasises on "learning by doing" which has been linked to deeper understanding and positive youth outcomes (Chan et al., 2021; Gordon, 2022). When situated within a culturally responsive pedagogy that uses students' cultural strengths in instruction, experiential approaches can validate lived experiences and local knowledge (Rychly & Graves, 2012; Samuels, 2018). For Gorkha adolescents, actively engaging with their own heritage through festivals, oral traditions, crafts, or ecological practices – offers opportunities for both academic enrichment and identity formation. Empirical work shows that culturally-grounded programs help marginalized youth develop pride and resilience: for example, school-based interventions supporting autonomy and relatedness in heritage culture promote stronger cultural identity (Hölscher et al., 2024), and Indigenous students describe having "strong roots" when their culture is affirmed in education (Buckingham & Hutchinson, 2024). By integrating experiential activities with respect for Gorkha traditions, educators can support adolescents' psychosocial identity development while they participate fully in formal learning.

Thus, this paper explores how experiential learning can serve as a pathway for cultural identity development among Gorkha adolescents in rural Darjeeling schools. By synthesizing theories of experiential learning (Kolb), psychosocial identity (Erikson), and culturally responsive pedagogy, we aim to conceptualize a framework that situates Gorkha cultural practices at the centre of

adolescent education. In doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions of how marginalized communities can reclaim cultural confidence through innovative pedagogy while participating fully in formal education systems.

Literature Review

Experiential Learning in Rural and Multicultural Education

Experiential learning through direct engagement with real-world contexts has been shown to strengthen connections to local culture and environment, especially in rural settings. Place-based education (PBE) is one such experiential approach that “emphasize experiential, community-based, and contextual/ecological learning”. A recent systematic review notes that PBE uses the local community and environment as “starting points...to cultivate greater connectivity to local contexts, cultures, and environments” (Yemini.et.al 2023). Sobel’s notion of PBE, for example, describes learning that “uses the local community and environment...as a starting point to teach concepts across the curriculum,” emphasizing “hands-on, real-world experiences” that tie learning to students’ own lives (Kitzys.et.al). These approaches are thought to foster deeper learning by making abstract concepts concrete and culturally meaningful. For instance, Zhu *et al.* (2024) find that rural experiential learning activities such as using village culture and landscapes as educational resources “form an understanding and recognition” of local cultural values. In a study from China, experiential learning in a rural village helped revitalize traditional cultural services, underscoring the role of rural environment as a living textbook for science and culture.

Experiential learning also supports multicultural understanding by situating students in diverse social contexts. Layne and Teng (2022) describe an intercultural activity where Singaporean students took themed walking tours through multiracial neighbourhoods. These *experiential* school “learning journeys” allowed students to engage directly with historical sites and community members. The authors report that by “participating in walking trails...in a few neighbourhoods” students learned about the “history of and life in multiracial Singapore,” deepening their intercultural awareness. Through guided reflection on those experiences, students grappled with concepts of racial harmony and difference. These findings suggest that embedding learning in culturally rich, real-world settings can help students internalize multicultural content in meaningful ways.

In rural or under-resourced areas, experiential pedagogies often incorporate students’ own lives and communities. For example, Kizys *et al.* (2025) investigated project-based learning in rural U.S. middle schools, where educators developed STEM and career curricula linked to local industries and landscapes. They describe a place-based professional-development model in which teachers collaborated with local counsellors to design projects “aligned with rural community local needs and STEM careers.” This collaborative, real-world focus helped make science learning relevant to rural students’ futures. The study highlights that PBE/PBL approaches can compensate for resource gaps: by leveraging local assets (farms, factories, etc.) and integrating career themes, rural learners remained engaged and saw the value of schooling in their own contexts.

Taken together, the literature on experiential and place-based learning in multicultural settings underscores two themes: (1) situating education within students’ cultural and community contexts enhances relevance and engagement (2) hands-on, real-life activities (field trips, community projects, etc.) can deepen understanding of abstract curricular content by tying it to tangible local examples. These studies support the idea that experiential learning in rural schools can affirm local culture and identity rather than abstract or remove it from students’ lives. However, much of this research comes from Western or well-resourced contexts; there is less on how such approaches work in Indian or Himalayan rural schools. Existing work suggests promise, but gaps remain about how rural, marginalized students (such as Gorkha youth) might uniquely benefit from experiential methods.

Cultural Identity and Schooling in Marginalized Communities

Formal schooling often poses cultural challenges for youth in marginalized communities. Multiple studies indicate that when school curricula and norms clash with students’ home cultures, youth can feel alienated from their own identity. For example, Sunil George *et al.* (2024) studied Indigenous Adiya (Adivasi) youth in Attapadi, India, who had attended distant residential schools. Participants reported a “fear of losing Indigenous identity, shame of being Indigenous” upon returning to their villages. They described feeling “confusion and stress” trying to re-integrate into their community after schooling. These youths became disconnected from key resilience factors (like cultural traditions and land ties) that normally support Indigenous well-being. The implication is stark: schools that do not actively affirm students’ cultures can inadvertently contribute to identity loss and psychological stress.

Similarly, Khanal *et al.* (2023) document how schooling can mis-align with community values among the Kham Magar in rural Nepal. Initially, families valued national education for its respect and opportunities. Over time, however, students felt the curriculum ignored their agrarian lifestyle and language. The authors note that if schooling is simply adjusted for community needs (e.g. new classes or incentives) without careful design, “students could be taught in ways that make better adjustments... but at the cost of losing their unique culture”. In other words, assimilation to dominant education risks eroding indigenous cultural identity. Khanal *et al.* argue for “culturally responsive, inclusive education” so that schooling complements rather than supplants local culture. When schooling ignores students’ culture or language, motivation and achievement can suffer. Khanal *et al.* observed that many Kham Magar youth felt formal education had drifted away from village life. Students expected relevant skills for farming or local trades, but found rote exam-focused teaching instead. This disconnect led some youths to disengage or drop out. In effect, the school appeared to serve an external agenda, not the community’s aspirations. Such misalignment is echoed worldwide: minority students often feel their identities are devalued by a curriculum centered on the majority culture.

Altogether, the literature on marginalized schooling underscores a critical tension: schools can unwittingly undermine cultural identity unless curricula and pedagogy are deliberately inclusive. Across contexts, youth report that homogenizing education (monolingual classrooms, outsider textbooks, etc.) pressures them to abandon their heritage (George *et al.*, 2024; Khanal *et al.*, 2023). Conversely, when educational settings acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds, identity affirmation and engagement improve (Paris & Alim, 2017). In sum, marginalized adolescents' cultural identity development is profoundly shaped by their schooling experiences: if education neglects or denigrates their culture, youths risk identity confusion and alienation.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Identity Affirmation

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) explicitly seeks to bridge schooling and students' cultural worlds. Gay (2002) famously defined CRP as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively". In practice, this means linking lessons to students' home culture, language, and knowledge. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that CRP must address two goals simultaneously: high academic achievement *and* cultural empowerment. As one review summarizes, culturally relevant teaching "addresses academic achievement while also fostering students' development of their cultural identity". In other words, CRP teachers connect curriculum to students' cultural strengths so that learning affirms rather than denies who the students are.

Research shows CRP benefits student identity and motivation. Rychly and Graves (2012) note that CRP engages students by enabling them to "reflect their own culture" in school activities, thereby connecting home and classroom. When students see their cultural norms and knowledge valued in lessons, they develop positive self-concept and pride. Conversely, neglecting cultural context can signal that a student's identity is irrelevant, which undermines engagement. Riley *et al.* (2024) provide a concrete illustration: in Australian teacher education, most curricula remain Eurocentric, leaving Indigenous students feeling invisible. Their study of an Indigenous content program found that effective CRP "emphasized the importance of listening to Indigenous voices to ensure schools promote intercultural understanding and...serve all learners' needs". In other words, incorporating local Indigenous histories and perspectives into pedagogy helped affirm those students' cultural backgrounds and improved classroom inclusivity.

Overall, the literature suggests CRP can affirm student identity by making school learning culturally meaningful. Teachers who adopt CRP move beyond treating culture as a peripheral topic; instead, they weave students' languages, community knowledge, and values throughout instruction. This approach increases student engagement and resilience, as kids feel respected. For instance, Gay (2002) contends that when educators use "cultural characteristics...of ethnically diverse students" as the starting point, all students learn more deeply. Thus, culturally responsive or culturally sustaining pedagogies are seen as key to preventing the identity loss that often occurs in marginalized classrooms.

Region-Specific Studies (India, Nepal, Himalayan Contexts)

Research specific to the Himalayan region and related communities provides additional context for Gorkha adolescents. In Nepal, Khanal *et al.* (2023) highlight the Kham Magar case: remoteness and tribal culture clash with the national curriculum, underscoring the need for curriculum adaptation that preserves cultural identity. Although this study focuses on Nepal's inner mountain communities, similar dynamics likely affect Gorkha youths who straddle Nepali and Indian cultures.

In India's Himalayan belt, limited studies touch on identity. Ozer *et al.* (2019) examined identity development among Ladakhi young adults. They found that while basic identity processes (exploration, commitment) occur, Western identity models did not fully fit this indigenous context. The study concluded that "identity models should be developed or adapted to the specific sociocultural context" of Himalayan populations. This suggests that Gorkha adolescents may also follow unique identity trajectories shaped by their mountain heritage.

Another Himalayan case comes from Garhwal (Northeast India): youth who migrate for education develop what Smith and Gergan (2015) call a "diaspora within." These students form a distinct cultural identity by comparing their village roots with cosmopolitan urban life. As one young student noted, seeking higher education makes one "a diaspora within [his] own nation," mixing local traditions with broader aspirations. This resonates with Darjeeling Gorkhas, many of whom balance Nepali language and customs with Indian state schooling leading to complex, hybrid identities.

Finally, historical-political studies add perspective. Golay's (2006) sociological analysis of Darjeeling notes that colonial era labels (Gorkhas as a "martial race") imposed an external identity on Nepali-speaking hill peoples. Even today, that narrative lingers in politics (e.g. Gorkhaland movement), complicating how Gorkha youths see themselves. Golay argues that this colonial legacy has "foreclosed" other forms of Gorkha self-representation, contributing to the community's identity struggles. This underscores how schooling (which historically reinforced nationalist narratives) may conflict with local identity formation.

In sum, region-specific research shows that Himalayan and South Asian Mountain communities face unique identity issues in schooling. Remote tribal groups like the Kham Magar or Ladakhi communities often find national education misaligned with their culture. Himalayan migrants synthesize local and national influences to construct identity. And political-historical forces have long shaped Gorkha identity beyond the classroom. However, few studies specifically examine how experiential education might support Gorkha adolescents' identity in Darjeeling. This gap suggests a need to study interventions (like culturally grounded experiential learning) tailored to this community's context.

Research Gap

The reviewed literature collectively indicates that experiential, culturally grounded education can reinforce rural students' sense of identity by integrating local culture and environment into learning. In contrast, conventional schooling in marginalized communities often pressures youth toward assimilation, risking the loss of cultural identity. Culturally responsive pedagogies offer a potential solution: by deliberately connecting curriculum to students' home cultures, they can affirm identity while simultaneously achieving academic goals. However, most empirical work on these topics originates from non-Himalayan contexts. Region-specific studies in the Himalayan belt highlight distinctive identity processes but rarely address experiential learning as a pedagogical strategy within schools. In particular, there is a notable gap concerning Gorkha adolescents in rural Darjeeling: research has not yet examined how experiential learning within their schools might foster cultural identity development.

This gap motivates the present study, which aims to investigate how place- and culture-based learning experiences can influence Gorkha adolescents' identity formation and their engagement with formal schooling.

Objectives

- To examine experiential learning as a pedagogical approach for integrating cultural knowledge into the formal education of Gorkha adolescents in rural Darjeeling.
- To explore the role of experiential learning in fostering cultural identity development among secondary-school students (Class 8) within the Gorkha community.
- To analyze how culturally relevant, experience-based practices including oral traditions, local crafts, ecological practices, and community rituals can be incorporated into rural schooling to strengthen both academic engagement and cultural belonging.
- To develop a conceptual framework that links experiential learning with cultural identity affirmation for marginalized adolescents in Himalayan contexts.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative conceptual review approach, drawing exclusively on secondary sources. A systematic search was conducted for peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses, and conference papers addressing experiential learning, cultural identity, and minority education, with a focus on South Asia and comparable global contexts. Key contributions from psychology (e.g., Erikson's psychosocial theory) and education (e.g., Kolb's experiential learning cycle, culturally responsive pedagogy) were identified to inform the conceptual framing. Rather than generating new empirical data, the study synthesizes these diverse strands of scholarship into a coherent analytical model. This method is particularly suitable given the paucity of empirical work on Gorkha adolescents in Darjeeling, allowing the paper to integrate theory and prior findings to construct a framework for future research and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Kolb's model posits that learning occurs in a four-stage cycle – Concrete Experience → Reflective Observation → Abstract Conceptualization → Active Experimentation through which individuals transform experience into knowledge. In our context, a Gorkha adolescent might first engage in a cultural event (concrete experience), reflect on its meaning (reflection), derive general lessons about heritage (conceptualization), and then apply them by practicing traditions or teaching peers (experimentation). This iterative process of doing and reflecting is fundamental to internalizing cultural knowledge.

According to Kolb, learners enter the cycle with different preferences, but all stages contribute to deeper understanding. Thus, teachers should design culturally relevant experiences (e.g., local festivals, craft workshops) and facilitate reflection, making the abstract cultural concepts explicit. In a culturally responsive classroom, an educator might guide students to analyze what a festival tells them about Gorkha values, encouraging conceptual links between tradition and identity.

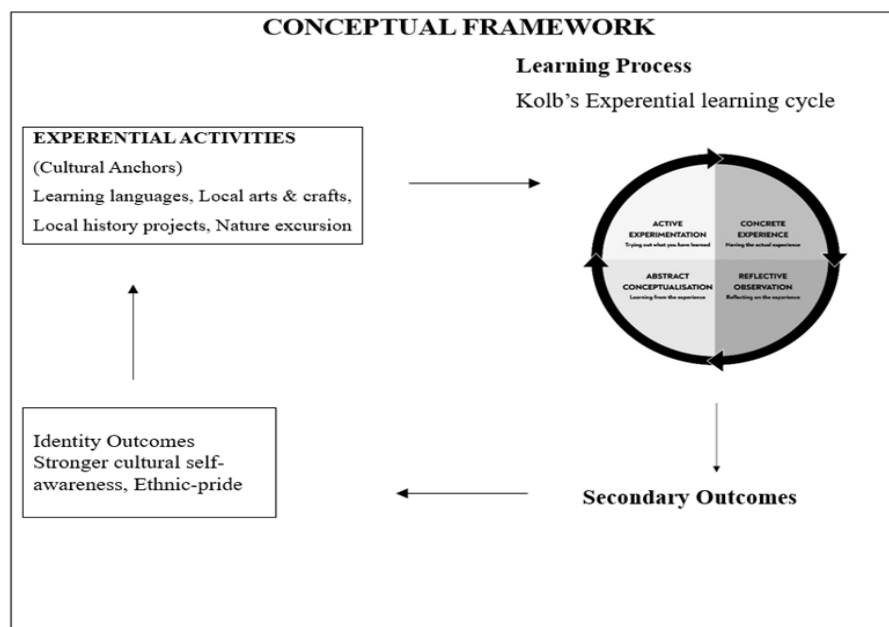
Psychosocial Identity Theory (Erikson) holds that adolescence (roughly ages 12–18) is the critical period for identity formation. Erikson argued that successfully resolving the "identity vs. role confusion" stage leads to a coherent sense of self, while failure can result in confusion about one's place in society. For ethnic-minority youth, cultural/ethnic identity is a core component of this task. Stable ethnic identity has been empirically linked to higher academic engagement, self-esteem, and psychological well-being. In practice, adolescents who see their heritage valued in school are more likely to develop positive self-views and academic motivation. Thus, identity-focused pedagogy must provide opportunities for exploration and affirmation of students' ethnic heritage.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) emphasizes that students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences should be at the centre of teaching. As Samuels (2018) notes, "*culture is central to how all learning takes place*", and CRP is a student-centered approach that "*includes cultural references*" in curriculum. This perspective implies that when teachers build on students' home culture, learning becomes more meaningful. In our framework, CRP provides the supportive context for experiential activities: educators demonstrate respect for Gorkha language, traditions, and values, thereby validating students' identities. Under CRP, a science lesson might use local farming practices as examples, or a literature class might include Nepali folktales. These practices signal to Gorkha adolescents that their culture is valued in school, mitigating cultural mismatch and confusion.

Together, these theories suggest a synergy: Experiential Learning (Kolb) provides the process (active, reflective learning), CRP supplies the culturally aligned content and learning environment, and Erikson highlights the developmental goal (solid ethnic identity).

Conceptual Framework

To illustrate the proposed relationships, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model consisting of three interconnected domains: (A) Experiential Activities, (B) Learning Processes, and (C) Identity Outcomes.



A. Experiential Activities (Cultural Anchors):

This domain comprises school- and community-based activities grounded in Gorkha culture, such as Nepali language enrichment, craft and art workshops, oral history documentation, and ecological excursions to culturally significant sites. These experiences function as the concrete experiences in Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

B. Learning Processes:

Under the guidance of teachers employing culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), these experiential activities progress through Kolb's four stages of learning: reflection, conceptualization, experimentation, and application. For instance, following a heritage trek (Domain A), students engage in reflective group discussions (Domain B), where teachers facilitate connections between cultural knowledge and broader educational goals. CRP ensures that cultural relevance is maintained at each stage of the cycle.

C. Identity Outcomes:

Through repeated engagement in this cycle, adolescents gradually develop stronger cultural self-awareness and ethnic pride. Drawing on Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the framework suggests that successful navigation of this stage fosters a secure sense of identity, articulated in affirmations. As cultural identity consolidates, adolescents are more likely to demonstrate enhanced self-esteem, motivation, and academic engagement. In the broader perspective, this contributes to communal resilience and the continuity of cultural heritage across generations.

Secondary Outcome:

Although not the central focus of the model, experiential learning may also nurture community problem-solving. Empowered by a strengthened sense of identity, students may apply traditional knowledge (e.g., indigenous agricultural practices) to address local challenges, thereby benefiting both school and community.

In sum, the framework positions Kolb's cycle as the core mechanism, Erikson's identity theory as the developmental foundation, and CRP as the pedagogical approach that ensures cultural relevance. Together, these elements demonstrate how experiential learning can be mobilized to support cultural identity formation among Gorkha adolescents in rural Darjeeling.

Application of the conceptual framework: Demo Lesson plan

To demonstrate how this framework can be translated into classroom practice, the following demo lesson plan has been developed on a Civics topic: "Democracy and Equality". This lesson exemplifies how experiential activities (Domain A) can be structured through guided learning processes (Domain B) to produce meaningful identity outcomes (Domain C).

Topic: Democracy and Equality

Class: VIII

Duration: 60–70 minutes

Framework: Experiential Activities (A) → Learning Processes (B) → Identity Outcomes (C)

1. Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand the core principles of democracy and equality.
- Relate democratic ideals to their lived experiences in Darjeeling’s Gorkha community.
- Analyze challenges to equality (language rights, representation, access to opportunities).
- Reflect on their role as future citizens in strengthening democratic values.

2. Teaching–Learning Materials

- Ballot slips/box for mock voting
- Chart papers & markers for group reflections
- Case examples from Darjeeling (e.g., demand for recognition of Nepali language, representation of Gorkhas in politics, community festivals that showcase equality)

3. Lesson:

Domain / Stage	Activity	Teacher’s Role	Students’ Role	Expected Outcome
A. Experiential Activities (Concrete Experience)	Conduct a Mock Election in class. Students vote on an issue relevant to their community (e.g., whether to prioritize funding for cultural festivals, school facilities, or ecological preservation in Darjeeling).	Set up mock elections (ballots, candidates, voting). Guide process.	Participate as voters/candidates, campaign briefly, cast votes.	Students experience democratic process and fairness of elections.
B. Reflective Observation	Group discussion: • Was the process fair? • Did every voice count equally? • What if a minority group’s interest was ignored?	Ask reflective questions, encourage linking to local community experiences.	Share reflections, recall real-life instances (e.g., Gorkhas demanding equal recognition, language rights).	Students connect democratic values to lived challenges of equality in their community.
C. Abstract Conceptualization	The teacher explains concepts of Democracy & Equality (political equality, cultural rights, minority representation). Link to examples: Nepali as an official language in Indian Constitution, we should have healthy cultural pride in our place Darjeeling.	Bridge experiential activity with textbook content + community context.	Take notes, prepare mind-maps linking democracy ↔ equality ↔ cultural rights.	Deeper conceptual understanding of democracy as inclusive governance.
D. Active Experimentation	Students design “Equality in Our Community” Action Plans (posters, slogans, short skits) on issues like: • Gender equality in schools • Respecting cultural diversity • Equal opportunity in community participation.	Facilitate group work, provide materials, encourage cultural references.	Work in groups, present their action plans.	Students practice applying democratic and equality principles to real contexts.
E. Identity Outcomes	Reflection journal: “ <i>As a Gorkha student in Darjeeling, how does democracy give me a voice and ensure equality?</i> ”	Provide prompts and feedback.	Write individual responses.	Stronger cultural self-awareness, pride in democratic participation, commitment to equality.

4. Assessment

- Formative: Observation of participation in mock election and discussion.
- Summative: Evaluation of group action plans + individual reflection journals.

5. Expected Outcomes

- Students gain practical understanding of democracy and equality.
- Connection between textbook concepts and Darjeeling Gorkha community struggles (language rights, recognition, equal representation).
- Development of cultural pride, civic responsibility, and identity as equal citizens in a democracy.

Analysis

To see how experiential learning supports Gorkha adolescents' cultural identity, we integrate the above theories with illustrative findings. Concrete cultural experiences (e.g. participating in Dashain or Tihar festivals, learning traditional Nepali songs/dance, visiting ethnic historical sites) serve as Kolb's concrete experiences. In these activities, students actively engage with Gorkha culture. Under the facilitation of culturally responsive teachers, these experiences become learning opportunities: teachers might, for instance, explicitly explain the cultural significance of rituals or use the experience to teach language and values. CRP ensures that these activities are tied to curriculum goals rather than treated as extracurricular. Following the experience, reflective observation is encouraged: students discuss what they felt, what values were expressed, and how these relate to their own lives. School journals or group talks could be used. For example, after a field trip to a local monastery, students might reflect on themes of community and heritage they observed. This reflection connects to Erikson's notion that adolescents are consciously evaluating who they are and where they fit culturally. Next, abstract conceptualization occurs as students articulate general lessons from their reflections. They might formulate principles such as "*Our community values respect for elders*" or "*Our language carries our history*". Teachers can support this by linking cultural lessons to academic concepts (e.g. studying the mathematics of traditional weaving patterns). This helps adolescents integrate specific experiences into a broader sense of ethnic heritage and identity. Finally, active experimentation lets students apply their newly conceptualized knowledge. For instance, they might organize a cultural showcase, teach younger peers a folk song, or apply traditional problem-solving methods to a project. These actions reinforce identity by turning understanding into lived practice. Crucially, students often come up with creative ways to weave culture into their daily lives, which strengthens their sense of agency over their identity. The outcome of this cycle is a reinforced cultural identity. When Gorkha youth see their heritage repeatedly validated and integrated into learning, they develop a stronger ethnic self-concept. As Buckingham & Hutchinson (2024) report, "*cultural identity was developed through storytelling, experiential learning, connection, personal exploration, and sharing*" among Alaska Native students, all elements present in the above cycle. Similarly, the meta-analysis by Chan et al. (2021) meta-analysis shows that experiential programs enhance adolescents' self-worth and social connectedness, both critical dimensions of identity.

Although the central focus of this framework is identity development, secondary benefits may emerge. For example, ecological learning projects may indirectly foster local problem-solving capacities. Such outcomes, while valuable, are understood as byproducts rather than primary aims. The overarching contribution remains the integration of cultural heritage into formal schooling as a pathway to strengthen identity and academic engagement among Gorkha adolescents. Building on these insights, we propose that experiential learning can be aligned to the Gorkha context and can serve as a bridge between heritage and modern schooling. By embedding rituals, oral traditions, and place-based knowledge within Kolb's learning cycle, schools can both affirm cultural identity and foster academic skills. This model positions identity not as an incidental outcome of education, but as a central developmental goal for marginalized adolescents. We argue that when schools validate heritage in this way, Gorkha youth will be better equipped to navigate both their cultural belonging and broader societal participation. Such an approach may also provide a replicable framework for other Himalayan and minority communities facing similar tensions between assimilation and cultural preservation.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that experiential learning, when grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, can play a transformative role in shaping the cultural identity of Gorkha adolescents in rural Darjeeling. By embedding heritage-based practices into Kolb's learning cycle, schools can validate students' cultural backgrounds while simultaneously fostering academic growth. Such an approach reframes identity not as a peripheral byproduct of education but as a central developmental goal. Although global scholarship has highlighted the promise of experiential, culture-based learning, the specific realities of Gorkha youth in Darjeeling remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes a conceptual model that positions cultural identity affirmation at the heart of rural education. This contribution underscores that minority adolescents thrive when their schooling reflects and respects their heritage. For Gorkha adolescents, experiential learning offers not only a means of academic engagement but also a pathway toward secure identity formation and communal resilience.

Looking ahead, empirical validation of this conceptual model is essential. Future research could employ ethnographic case studies, classroom-based interventions, or participatory action research to examine how experiential activities unfold in rural schools. Longitudinal approaches would help trace how identity outcomes evolve across adolescence, while comparative studies with other Himalayan or minority communities could reveal broader patterns. Moreover, collaboration among educators, policymakers, and community leaders will be necessary to design and sustain curricula that embed experiential learning in

meaningful ways. Such work will ensure that identity-affirming education is not only theorized but also practiced, thereby advancing both cultural continuity and educational equity for marginalized communities.

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