

Empowering Educational Stakeholders

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This paper will be divided into four parts. The first part will unravel the jargon found in the title of this paper and attempt to explicate the notions of 'empowerment' and 'stakeholder'. The second part will take these definitions and proffer an analysis of the current situation to be found in Nepalese government schools, particularly those at the primary and lower secondary level. The third section will argue that a greater degree of empowerment to stakeholders would overcome many of the fundamental problems located in the Nepalese education system, and look at some of the ways by which this might be achieved. The fourth part will suggest a checklist of factors that we as educationalists working in Nepal might wish to consider as a means by which we can empower educational stakeholders and bring about real changes in the education system as a whole.

Part (i) "Empowering" "Educational Stakeholders"

Empowerment is one of those development buzzwords that are often used but seldom truly understood. I would suggest that empowerment – in an educational context – is a relatively simple thing to identify, although a rather more complex thing to implement. Empowerment means allocating individuals and groups roles within the system that they are best suited for and capable of doing, and in ensuring that effective monitoring and support systems are in place to ensure that these individuals and groups are doing the job required. It also means giving these individuals and groups responsibilities which they will be evaluated against. Trust and clarity are absolutely central to successful empowerment, and yet as even a cursory view of the Nepalese education system would suggest, these are two factors which are unfortunately in abeyance.

As for what makes an educational stakeholder, to my mind, there are five key educational stakeholders who in different societies, types of schools and levels of education will hold a varying degree of sway, influence and authority. These stakeholders are, directly, students, teachers and headmasters and, indirectly, parents/the community and the state. The three groups within the school, in most forms of education, form a direct hierarchy. The other two have a cross-cutting influence across all sectors, again in different amount depending on a number of factors.

Part (ii) The Nepali school

Generalising about any education system is inherently an act which opens itself up to criticism. However, in order to suggest cross-cutting policies which will end up with the improvement of an education system, it is necessary to do this. As such, looking at the whole of the Nepalese system, concentrating predominantly at the primary and lower secondary level, which is where I have most experience and also which I think is the absolute key to Nepal's long-term development, the picture that hovers into view is something like this:

The two groups which wield the most, and one might not unfairly say disproportionate, influence and power are headmasters and the state. Turning first to headmasters, it appears something of a paradox in an age where we pronounce the importance of 'education for all' that headmasters are generally the least representative people in Nepalese society. They are still almost exclusively male. Often they will be of high caste, if not absolutely as a Brahmin or Chettri, then certainly relatively in comparison to the other ethnic groups in their local area. They are also, often, highly political. In other words, the dominant trends of Nepalese society has replicated itself almost identically in the school.

Again, the problem of language comes into our discussion – what is meant by 'the State' and its influence on the education system. This, however, is not the place to attempt a concise definition. I think in the Nepalese context we can say that the concept of 'Nepaliness' is expressed very clearly in the curriculum in a number of different ways (as such, the notion of 'Citizenship classes is far ahead of its nascent UK counterpart) and through the strong 'hidden curriculum' of the school which reinforces notions of status, gender and ethnicity in many instances. However, in practical terms, the state is actually quite unempowered with its strong

centralising tendencies in Saano Thimi rendering District Education Offices, which should be the dynamo of change, relatively weak and ineffective.

The other three groups – parents/the community, students, and teachers – all have conspicuously little stakeholding. Students are not consulted on any issues, and seen very much as the 'lowest of the low' – this is reflected in the classroom pedagogy of 'talk and chalk' where 95% of lesson time is TTT (teacher talking time) and 5% STT (Student Talking Time). Teachers, frequently unqualified, poorly paid and mismanaged, and consequently devoid of any vocational aspect to their teaching do not feel (and are not meant to feel) empowered.

When mass schooling first came into being in Nepal in the early 50s, parents and the community were actively encouraged to engage in the education system – both financially and logistically. However, as the State's hand has clawed back much of this influence, we find the paradoxical situation whereby more Nepalis have received a basic education than ever before, and yet their power and influence over the education their children receive is as weak as it has ever been. The situation is no better in the private sector in real terms – parents certainly have a lot more power as they have the financial clout that parents of students in government schools do not – and yet all this serves to do is reduce education to a numbers game – the majority of parents who send their children to private schools in Nepal is because they want them to (a) learn English and (b) pass exams. Consequently, all other aspects of education are sidelined and these two objectives prioritised above all others.

For teachers in government schools, the situation is one of general disenfranchisement. An informal system of *afno manche* and *chakari* exists in many Nepalese schools, creating staffrooms which are often factional, and not devoted to any overarching ameliorating goal. Some teachers get ahead, the most do not. Too often schools are the playgrounds where the politics of the Village Development Committee are played out, and it is the students (and ultimately, the country) who suffer. Extremely low morale amongst teachers which has been caused by poor pay, no training, outside interests, lack of management and guidance by headmasters, lack of support from DEOs and parents amongst other factors, has led to the wholesale adoption of the *ke garne* culture throughout schools. One pertinent example of this comes from my own experience working in Parbat district. One of the English teachers ran a tea-shop at the front gate of the school which he would work in almost all day long, selling tea and snacks to the very students who he should have been teaching – and all this with the full knowledge of the headmaster – well, I say full knowledge, but the headmaster wasn't always to be found at the school either – he was often held up by affairs at the private school just 200 metres down the road which he owned.

Part (iii) Empowerment of Stakeholders as a path to improvement

Many Nepalese schools in the government sectors operate in what is effectively a zombie-like state. They exist, but they are not sure for what purpose; they move on defiantly and purposively, but they have no overall vision. They accept and understand that there are problems, but are unable or unwilling to do anything about it. Both internal and external changes are imperative for this benefits to accrue, and it is my contention that empowerment is the means by which this is to happen. As such, I have identified four major, cross-cutting issues that the Nepalese education system has to face if it is to progress in a non-Zombie like manner, and how a greater understanding and acceptance of the stakeholders' place within an educational 'system' can improve them.

The first of these problem areas is *poor school management*. Schools are managed poorly because of a lack of clarity and a lack of synergy between any of the major school actors. There is little meaningful conversation about school issues, often due to gender/caste determined behaviour and relationship, meaning that they are not nearly as effective as they could and should be. Schools as a whole need to be empowered by getting its members to work together more closely, and to understand their shared objectives and how they can work with each other. This can be done in a number of different ways – for example with students, by creating a prefect system and student committees to take some of the administrative burden off teachers (and develop their own leadership skills) and to run after school clubs, thereby taking education and learning beyond the mere scope of the classroom.

Secondly, as mentioned before, *political influence and interference* is a huge issue, and one of the most nefarious aspects of the system. However, empowering parents and the community

with more power in schools would, I believe, help overcome some of the worst aspects of the Nepali school, including nepotism, absenteeism and chauvinism. The community should directly employ teachers and headmasters at the primary and lower secondary level. This would create a system whereby they would have more involvement in their children's education and the school's place in the community because they would have a direct financial involvement.

Thirdly, *poor infrastructure in schools* is an oft-cited and very real problem for many schools. Crumbling classrooms, tiny playgrounds and non-existent toilets are common. The fault with this is always, without fail, lain at the state's feet. But to my mind the whole issue is something of a red herring – in the course of my work in Nepal I have come to see the 'infrastructure' situation as an excuse for schools not doing their job properly. This relates back to the 'ke garne' culture of schools that I mentioned earlier – "without x and without y nothing of any tangible benefit can be achieved, so there is little point in trying." This is of course nonsense – a school doesn't exist without students and teachers, but it does without classrooms and toilets. Of course facilities, resources, materials and so on aid an educational establishment, but they are not crucial.

The attitudes that exist within teachers, headmasters and parents alike in always criticising the state for the lack of infrastructure development is directly related to their feeling of disempowerment. Since their inception, schools have been seen primarily as being 'owned' by the state, which explains why local communities seldom will invest or donate money to it. Although in many communities this is simply a result of poverty, in others, where people do have some disposable income, it is for this first reason. If people felt a greater ownership, they would be more willing to get involved financially – or logistically as well – but the majority of people feel that the school is something separate from their home, and they – as 'illiterate farmers' – feel that they have no place there with the 'gurus'. For, Nepal is, in the main, a very non-fluid society (urban migration notwithstanding) with a high birth rate. Families will often live in one community all their life, and all five of their children might have the opportunity to go to the local primary school – but as it stands even if they could invest in the school, they would be unlikely to. People should be encouraged to feel a sense of pride in their school and what it can achieve – as such I would advocate the development of Parent-Teachers Association and the proper empowerment and training of School Management Committees.

Fourthly, one of the major problems, and specifically a concern by parents, is that *learning is not linked to life*. The choice which exists for many parents, especially those living in rural areas, can be summarised as follows: should I let my child, a useful economic unit, go to a school where the teacher is often absent, the headmaster ineffective, the classes enormous, and the value of what they learn minimal in their everyday life. Moreover, even if they do pass their SLC examination, we will probably not be able to afford to send them to higher education, and there is no employment for them here. Having got their SLC, they will not want to work in the fields, so they will just end up an economic burden for the family.

Again, a generalisation, but certainly this is a fear expressed by many parents in Nepal – the 'SLC syndrome' is particularly acute in the 'Kāte', the villages surrounding major conurbations which fall uneasily between the urban and the rural.

In theory, local communities are supposed to have a certain degree of control over the content of the curriculum, although in reality there is seldom any consultation, and the curriculum throughout Nepal is often a top-down, centralised affair, leading to ridiculous extremes – for example when I was teaching in Solukhumbu, one of the passages in the class five English text book used to contain a large passage about Neil Armstrong being the first man on the moon – this in a community where these children were four days walk from the nearest road, and hadn't even seen a bicycle, let alone car, or plane, or space rocket. On a more serious note though, the question of identity is important here as well, for the medium of instruction is being streamlined, more and more, to either Nepali or English at not only the secondary level, but the primary level as well. Mother tongues are seen as less and less relevant. Any future revision of the curriculum should not be solely an affair of Saano Thimi government offices and Western educational 'experts' but it should be a proper consultative affair with people from every corner of the Kingdom so that a fair a balanced system of learning can be put in place.

(iv) Checklist

The following list of factors is a practical checklist which I think all educational organisations in Nepal should strive for. It is by no means exhaustive, but rather should be treated as a starting

point. Although many of the items sound idealistic and theoretical, I believe that they are practically attainable.

- Parents and students should know their educational rights, and act upon them;
- Teachers and headmasters, certainly at the primary and lower secondary level, should be employed directly by the communities they serve;
- Encourage primary schools to use the medium of instruction most suitable for them whilst bearing in mind the demands of secondary schools;
- Students should be encouraged to be pro-active in their education;
- Headmaster should accept more responsibility for their schools rather than be in a position where they can blame external forces for the failings – more training and support for them (as many have never received any) would help them achieve this;
- Individual schools should be encouraged to develop 'contracts' between the various stakeholders – between teachers and students, headmasters and teachers, between students and parents, and so on. Once these ideas have been agreed, then they can be used as a reference point for monitoring the process.

In order to reach all of these goals, a concerted effort is needed by domestic and international organisations alike to develop training programmes, and systems of support that help facilitate these objectives. This will inevitably be a long and difficult process, but I personally believe that without approaching the problems of 'education' in such a holistic way, intervention is not nearly as effective or as efficient as it could be. In empowering people, you create virtuous circles.