

Schools Connect

Developing effective learning in Nepal



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Developing effective learning in Nepal: Insights into school leadership, teaching methods and curriculum

Edited by:
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Key Points

- A strong education system is fundamental to supporting young people to lead happy and fulfilled lives within a supportive local, national and global community.
 - In culturally diverse countries like Nepal, a research- and evidence-based approach is needed to find out what works best for schools. This volume highlights the need for careful analysis of the context and underlines the importance of high-quality research conducted within a range of contexts to inform the development of all aspects of education systems.
 - Issues highlighted across the research include: difficulties finding space for new pedagogical approaches in the current, standardised curriculum; parental expectations around grade attainment; limited training and understanding of role in school leadership; limited CPD for teachers; weak dissemination of school audit documents; limited existing research in the Nepali context.
- Recommendations include, first and foremost, that all initiatives should be dynamic, context-specific, aligned to local and national culture, and guard against a ‘West is best’ mentality, in order that reforms are embedded in a sustainable way.

Introduction

Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning was a flagship programme co-funded by the British Council and the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Involving over 30 countries around the world, Connecting Classrooms sought to provide opportunities for school leaders, teachers and students to develop core skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and imagination, and a global outlook through international partnerships and school-based projects.

This insight note describes the findings of five British Council-sponsored research studies and nine sponsored case studies, as part of the Connecting Classrooms programme, on developing successful schools in Nepal, focused on curriculum, pedagogy and school leadership. The aims of the research and case studies were to:

- 1 Offer insights for school leaders, teachers, policymakers and academics seeking to bring about changes in teaching and learning;
2. Contribute towards efforts to implement the second half of the Nepal School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016–2023.

Sponsored research studies

Laurent-Olive and Bourn conducted interviews with a representative from Nepal's Education Review Office and four teachers. They report that the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), encourages Nepalese schools towards a more learner-centred and interactive pedagogy and away from memorisation and rote learning. There is an emphasis on the promotion of national cultural values and an aim to equip learners with the skills to live and work in a global economy. However, a key challenge is to incorporate within core skills an understanding of cultural diversity (Haddad & Demsky, 1995). The authors recommend that all initiatives should draw on and properly align with local and national, as well as international and global, contexts and culture, in order that reform efforts are embedded in a sustainable way.

Khum Pathak interviewed teachers and employers and asked them what core skills they believe employees (especially school leavers) should have and how far the Nepalese education system facilitates the development of these skills. The core skills sought by companies in their employees extend beyond scientific and technological aptitude, with independent thinking high up their wish list. Education funders should support projects demonstrating creativity and innovation, and specific courses in core skills, plus their incorporation into the curriculum. A broader definition of core skills intersects with the existing life skills of Nepali people, with potential to side step the polarised perspectives of globalism versus localism, migration versus family and progress versus tradition. Small-scale business activities offer opportunities for students to practise and apply their theoretical knowledge. Local languages, not just English, present their own employment opportunities, and local practices by which parents earn their living such as agriculture should be valued in schools.

In their chapter, Pasha and Bourn similarly make the case for a dynamic, context-specific pedagogy, in this instance, for global learning. Building on Bourn (2014), they propose global learning should include: 1. a global outlook; 2. intercultural understanding; 3. ability to engage in open dialogue; 4. commitment to learning about global issues. They underline that each student's starting point in global learning should be considered according to their background, personal experience and belief system. In Nepal, this could be in reference to the learner's identity in terms of their home language, religion and societal status. The authors also look at the value to teachers and students in existing partnerships between Nepalese and UK schools. At the same time, they warn against partnerships which inadvertently 'exoticize' or 'other' Nepali contexts and call for a truly equal flow of ideas between partners.

Next, Tweedale and Staufenberg review the literature on school leadership to identify what the best school leaders do and how they do it. A key issue they identify is that in East, South and South East Asia, research points to important differences in cultural contexts for school leadership and, as Hallinger (2011) contends, comparison between school leadership in South Asian school systems and those in Europe and North America are difficult because much of 'the field of educational leadership and management in East Asia (and other parts of the developing world) relies too heavily upon theory and empirical findings from Western socio-cultural contexts'.

Many of these themes are picked up by Burgess (2016) who sets out leadership practices in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. He identifies five professional practices for good leadership:

1. Creating a strategic direction that is shared across the school community;
2. Leading teaching and learning, in which school leaders take a personal role in improving the quality of their students' experience by supporting and challenging their teachers to provide increasingly effective lessons;



3. Developing and working with others by providing a wide variety of professional development opportunities for staff to work collaboratively with colleagues both within the school and with colleagues in other schools;
4. Managing resources to cost effectively make the best use of the money and other resources allocated for the education of students;
5. Working in partnership with governance across the school system, where governments play a key role in providing leadership development training, recruiting and retaining good teachers and creating a climate in which schools can work together instead of in competition.

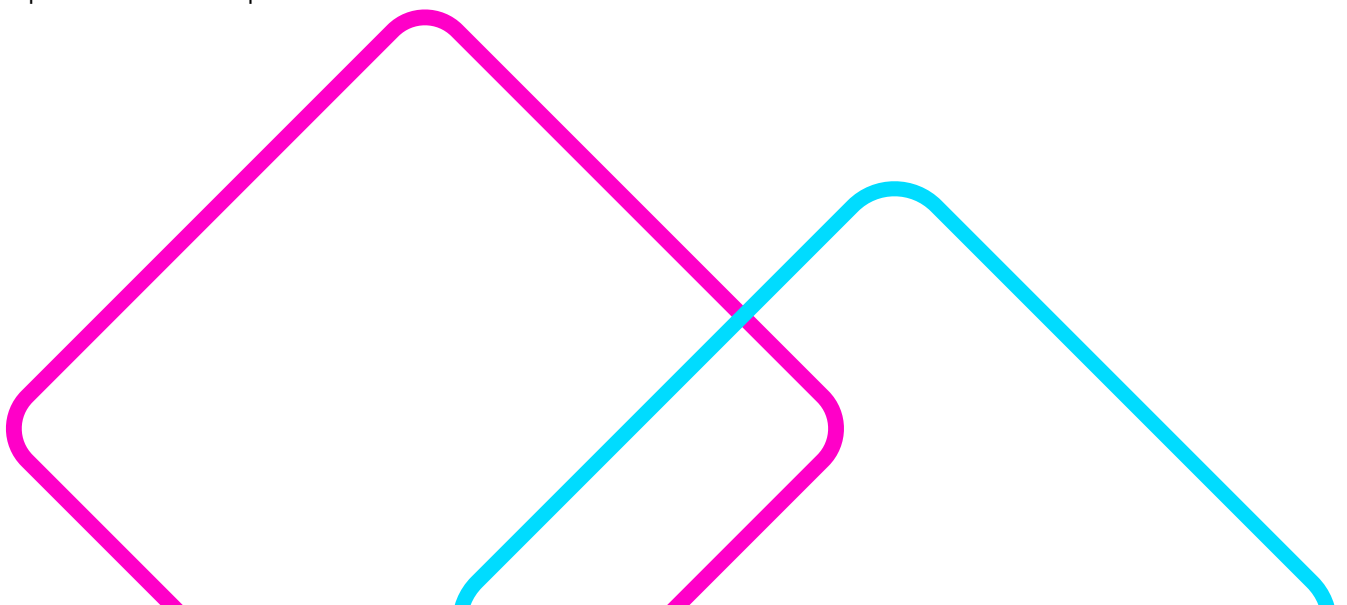
In the final chapter in the first section, Adams et al. examine the attributes of those Principals who are successfully improving schools in Malaysia, pointing to a holistic 'students first' – rather than merely exams oriented – approach, combined with a willingness to share and distribute leadership effectively. They identify five key characteristics and strategies of successful school leaders:

- 1 A clear, inclusive vision for the school
- 2 Respectful trust and challenge for staff
- 3 Attention to processes and structures for the organisation
- 4 Relationship build with external stakeholders.
- 5 High expectation, high support culture for students.

Case studies

In the nine case studies, the focus moves to specific initiatives carried out in schools. These case studies use semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, officials and parents in order to draw out recurring themes, while others analyse government documents and reports. In their case study on quality assurance processes in schools, Bhojraj Kafle and Prahlad Aryal examine Education Review Office (ERO) performance audits of schools. They conclude that although the quality assurance process in Nepal has been successful in identifying some major challenges to quality education in the country, weak dissemination of its findings is hindering its impact in terms of driving school improvement. This situation is made worse by a lack of clarity about who should be responsible for addressing certain issues. So the reports need to be produced in such a way that a) school leaders and staff get direct feedback about the school's score and the report's findings, b) the local government authority also receives the report's feedback and is expected to act on the findings and provide challenge to the school, c) parents know where to look for the reports, and d) the reports and the auditors who write them encourage a culture of acting on its findings. Meanwhile, analysis of the reports themselves shows there are serious challenges for Nepal's schools, particularly its community schools.

Meanwhile, the role of the Nepali head teacher and their senior leadership team is emphasised in several case studies. Gopal Bashyal found that most teachers interviewed currently have very poor participation in professional activities other than the compulsory government training, and the majority have never had their classroom practice observed by a school leader. Some head teachers seem more concerned with administrative duties, while at the same time considering they do enough to support their teachers' professional development. The author concludes that in order for head teachers in Nepal to improve as facilitators of professional development in teachers, they themselves need further training so that they understand the importance of supporting continuous professional development.



In his case study on how better school-community relations can develop reading skills in students by setting up a reading group, Indra Mani Rai notes that a supportive head teacher and school management committee can be the critical factor in the long-term survival of parent engagement initiatives. He suggests that school leaders wishing to drive school improvement should consider individual and institutional connectivity within and outside the school as an area of focus for their improvement plans.

Meanwhile, the potential for classroom teachers to execute cross-cultural initiatives is explored in Prem Prasad Poudel's case study on two Nepali schools participating in 'Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning'. In this case study, data was collected from two Kathmandu schools: one had partnered with two schools, in the UK and in northern India; the other with two schools, both in Pakistan. Interviews revealed that the programme is perceived as deepening students' collaborative, digital and cross-cultural communication skills.

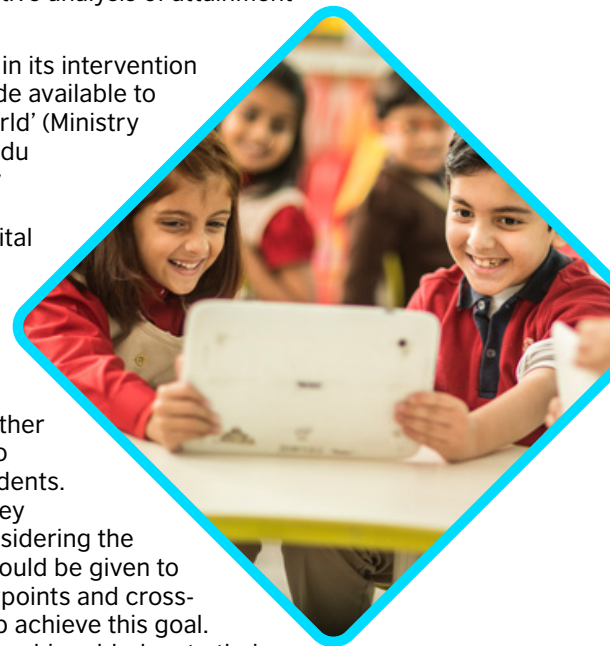
Five case studies look specifically at what teachers do in classrooms. Amit Bikram Sijapati observed classes and interviewed the teachers to understand staff conceptions of 'critical thinking and problem solving (CTPS)' and the challenges they face in introducing activities to develop these skills in students. He drew three key factors in implementing critical thinking successfully in the classroom from the research. The first was that teachers with a great passion for their profession were much keener to try new methods of teaching. Second, teachers who implemented CTPS successfully would establish existing knowledge and then ask students to reflect on that knowledge critically. Third, the culture of the classroom explicitly made students feel comfortable about asking questions. Likewise, there was significant support for teachers from the senior leadership team for their approach. However, the rigid standardised curriculum and parental demand for grade attainment were seen as barriers to be overcome in introducing CTPS.

In his chapter on assessing project-based learning effectively, Khagendra Gautam outlines a new approach called the 'MicroProject', in which students complete real-time project tasks during school hours. The author suggests that the MicroProject pilot has blended accepted learning practices in Nepal (classroom-based learning guided by a teacher) with new approaches (a learner centred, enquiry-led pedagogy). However, he also recommends that the impact of the MicroProject on academic attainment needs to be researched further, and more objective analysis of attainment data would be the next step for research.

The School Sector Development Plan 2016–23 specifically mentioned in its intervention strategies that 'ICT facilities and opportunities will increasingly be made available to enable learners to engage with the rapidly changing technological world' (Ministry of Education, Nepal, 2016). In 2015, Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University launched a new teacher education Master's which explicitly introduced ICT training into the course. Laxman Gnawali's case study reports on how graduates from the Master's course are improving digital literacy in their classrooms. It taught trainee teachers ICT-specific knowledge and used ICT and digital tools as a means to teach other aspects of the programme. The latter aspect not only increased their digital technology skills but also gave them an insight into how they could use them as teachers.

In a case study of a Malaysian school, Donnie Adams et al. look at whether a timetabled subject called 'Global Perspectives' is helping teachers to deliver 'global learning and global citizenship' more effectively for students. On the basis of the Malaysian experience, the researchers make two key recommendations for Nepali education policymakers who may be considering the viability of introducing global citizenship to schools. First, attention should be given to incorporating global issues and the development of international viewpoints and cross-cultural understanding in the curriculum. A dedicated subject can help achieve this goal. Second, teachers must not have this requirement to teach global citizenship added on to their workload without clarity about what it means or without training or resources to deliver it, and without sufficient space in their weekly timetable.

Finally, students themselves are the focus of Bharat Sigdel and Hari Bhakta Karki's case study of leadership development in extracurricular clubs at the Nepal Police School. Participants reported feeling more confident and better communicators, and that the clubs provided a space outside the classroom in which to prove themselves in new ways. About 45 per cent of students are enrolled in the clubs, which means more than half of students are not involved, and therefore school leaders should consider ways to encourage students, particularly those who are less confident, into these activities.



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