

TEACHER IDENTITY IN A U.S. FUNDED EDUCATION PROGRAM IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore educators' perceptions of teacher roles in the context of a U.S. funded STEM education program in Nepal. After an introduction, the paper draws on concepts of teacher identity and experience from work of William Ayers. The study then analyzes empirical evidence collected across three government school sites, which participated in the U.S. funded education program in Pokhara, Nepal. The study suggests teachers in Nepal represented their profession in terms of its significance for their own lives, the individual pursuits of their students, and the efforts of a national civil society. The paper concludes by using James Farrell's concept of community education to interpret these perspectives within changed educational landscape of foreign-funded education programs.

KEYWORDS: Education, teachers, identity, Nepal

INTRODUCTION

The stories told about Nepal by foreign governments, International and Non-Governmental Organizations (I/NGOs), and aid organizations often go something like:

Wedged between China and India, Nepal was relatively isolated from the Western world until the 1950s. Since then, the country has seen dramatic changes through the dissolution of its monarchy, a decade-long Maoist insurgency, and the creation of a multi-party parliamentary system. However, as one of the world's poorest countries, Nepal remains burdened by a lackluster economy with a heavy reliance on aid and tourism. To make matters worse, in April 2015 a devastating earthquake demolished villages, reduced numerous heritage sites to rubble, and killed thousands. Despite millions of dollars having been pledged for reconstruction, political instability has delayed much of the process of rebuilding. (Goldberg, 2015)

Given these challenges, Nepal has achieved impressive progress over recent decades. According to the World Bank, the country managed to reduce the percentage of people living on less than \$1.25 a day, from 53% in 2003-04 to 25% in 2010-11 (World Bank, 2016). Several social indicators in education, health, and gender equality have also improved. Nepal has successfully transitioned into a post-conflict status since the end of the civil war in 2006.

Despite a short duration of democratic government, and intermittent social unrest, Nepal's highly diverse population has worked determinedly to forge a consensus about the country's identity as a secular, inclusive, and democratic republic. Currently, Nepal aims to deliver on its economic potential. Education is a primary method for improving of the Nepalese social condition to this end. (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2016)

These narratives, while perhaps not factually incorrect, are but one vision of a place and people. Nevertheless, its sway stems from the new power relations inherent in development contexts (Fujikura, 2013). These dynamics shape the manner in which people conceptualize themselves, their surroundings, and activities. It also provides a platform for individuals to respond, exercising agency in relationship to larger structures thrust into their lives by local or global forces. This paper argues that development discourse and practice in Nepal both shapes and is reshaped by teachers as they explain and reflect upon their profession to an outsider (namely the researcher) in the context of a U.S funded education program.

GIRLS GET STEM SKILLS

Funded by the U.S. Department of State, the Girls Get STEM Skills (GGSS) program provided 254 girls in grades 6, 7, and 8 with foundational science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) skills during an eight-month period spanning 2015-16. GGSS took place at three government schools that were identified as having a large population of traditionally under-served students in Pokhara, Nepal's second largest urban centre. Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN), a NGO founded and run by Nepali women, served as the implementing organization and helped teachers conduct and coordinate STEM classes throughout the duration of the program.

The GGSS program was designed to bridge the gender achievement gap in Nepal by providing girls with training in core STEM skills. GGSS used targeted instruction of pre-STEM skills, such as computer literacy and problem solving, to address women's low representation in Nepal's skilled work force. While many empowerment-based programs focus on providing skill training to women already on the job market, GGSS addressed the problem at the secondary education level. By intervening at the secondary school level, before girls are tracked away from vocations in STEM, GGSS aimed to attract girls to high skill careers and avert inter-generational deficits in education.

The GGSS program also sought to affect the attitudes of parents, classroom teachers, and school administrators about the capacity of girls to excel in STEM subjects. Long-term goals included creating lasting shifts in schools' approach to teaching girls in pre-STEM skills. In this way, the GGSS program did have overt ideological intentions that explicitly labeled girls' absence in STEM fields as both a material and cultural problem. To prepare schools to implement the GGSS curriculum a leader of the GGSS grant team trained participating teachers, administrators, and EWN staff over a two-day orientation program in Pokhara.

TEACHER IDENTITY

This paper will operationalize William Ayers' concepts of teacher identity and experience. In *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, Ayers (1993) explores that path a

teacher takes along the path to their vocation. Ayers's articulation of teachers' path sheds light on the motivations, challenges, and perspectives that educators often share in common across the modern world. As Ayers' argues, certain commonalities can be recognized in the experience and call of teachers despite a difference of place. Through Ayers' framework, this study will aim to contextualize Nepalese teachers' reflections of their own experiences and identities as a teacher.

Ayers (1993) begins by identifying the challenge of teaching—an exercise which places the reader immediately in the shoes of a teacher. He writes, "To make a life in teaching is largely to find your own way, to follow this or that thread, to work until your fingers ache, your mind feels as if it will unravel, and your eyes giveout, and to make mistakes and rework large pieces" (p. 1). For Ayers, teaching is rooted in action and involves a plethora of skills and tasks. He continues, "Teaching is instructing, advising, counseling, organizing, assessing, guiding, goading, showing, managing, modeling, coaching, disciplining, prodding, preaching, persuading, proselytizing, listening, interacting, nursing, and inspiring... Teaching is spectacularly unlimited" (p. 5). Given this complexity, and the combination of lackluster pay, low status in society, and difficult working conditions, Ayers draws attention to the vocational calling which many teachers feel despite the challenges of their profession. Regardless of the drawbacks, Ayers' conceptual framework of teacher identity is rooted in the educator's call to empathy. There are still young people who need a thoughtful, caring adult in their lives, he points out, from a teacher's perspective. There are still injustices and deficiencies in the world that need adjustment—there are still worlds to change. Accordingly, for most educators, Ayers argues, "teaching is world-changing work" (p. 8).

Ayers (1993) goes on to assess the ways teachers see their students, create an environment for learning which reflects their values, build bridges towards further horizons of knowledge, shape the curriculum towards the most worthwhile experiences and knowledge, evaluate student progress, and learn to continually engage in the mystery of teaching. Ayers writes,

The work of a teacher—exhausting, complex, idiosyncratic, never twice the same—is, at its heart, an intellectual and ethical enterprise. Teaching is the vocation of vocations, a calling that shepherds a multitude of other callings. It is an activity that is intensely practical and yet transcendent, brutally matter-of-fact, and yet fundamentally creative act. Teaching begins in challenge and is never far from mystery. (p. 16)

For Ayers, teaching relies upon a continual openness to dynamic human elements, new situations, and unfinished business. Excellent schools attract good teachers and empower them to teach, he argues. These schools are always unique and do not follow a one-size fits all approach—they have high expectations for all learners, teachers are respected, and there is continuous improvement. In this context, the path and identity of a teacher flourishes, from Ayes' perspective.

Ayers' (1993) descriptions of teachers' motivations, challenges, and vocational path represent a framework in which Nepali perceptions of teacher roles may be understood in the broad context of the teaching profession. For example, following Ayers' rationale, through a passion for expanding student's understanding of science, a teacher, from Nepal or any nation, may cite a love for the moment of student realization and progress. Ayers' work helps conceptualize Nepali teacher motivations

and identities as both unique and shared with teachers elsewhere. The common and disparate aspects of educators' experience in Nepal reflect the idiosyncratic and similar nature of performing work under the banner of education. This orientation helps situate this investigation of teacher identities among Nepali educators within the profession as it lived in the modern world.

TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE

In their article "Teachers' Experience of Curriculum: Policy, Pedagogy, and Situation," Ayers with Therese Quinn, David Stovall, and Libby Scheiern (2008) describe the difficulties facing the modern teacher. To be a teacher today, they assert, is to walk a contested, challenging landscape (Ayers et al., 2008). The authors write, "The responsibility is to figure out when and how to take sides, to express a point of view, to advocate for a particular position. The burden is the weight of honest, integrity, and justice" (p. 321). The teachers in Nepal certainly occupied a specific cultural position in their teaching of the STEM program. By educating girls in a male-dominated society, GGSS educators were working against hegemonic gender norms. The authors explain the necessity of this position, "We must take sides. This is a time of crisis and suffering. It is a time to act. Knowledge is a form of power, a particular kind of power that can be employed on behalf of liberation and against the naked power of brute force. Knowledge has the power to undermine and perhaps, to overthrow force" (p. 321). The idea of taking a stand for a moral value such as justice or freedom provides a lens for analyzing the relationship of the male Nepali teachers to the GGSS program to girls and their society more generally.

METHODS

A dearth of literature has focused on the perceptions of Nepali educators in the context of a foreign-funded education program. To address this gap, the research question of this study was, how do educators view the concept of teacher roles in Nepal within the context of a U.S. funded education program? Participants were recruited and selected from teachers and administrators who taught or implemented the GGSS program at three Pokhara area Secondary Schools in 2015-16. EWN provided an existing list of GGSS educators and facilitated introductions between the researcher and participants. All three GGSS participating schools and the EWN main office in Pokhara, Nepal were visited.

A total of 18 Nepali educators were interviewed. This included 10 individual interviews and two focus groups consisting of six and two educators respectively. Despite the nature of GGSS, all of the teachers were men. The interview protocol, based on the research questions, was semi-structured and open ended. During interviews, participants chose a pseudonym and completed a demographic questionnaire. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. At the end of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to change their responses or express anything not covered in the interview. Focus Groups were arranged for participants who preferred group discussion to individual interviews. Two classroom observations were also conducted at the invitation of teachers—an eighth grade science and a tenth grade education class.

Lastly, the researcher used field notes to record descriptions of people, places, and conversations. The field journal also served the purpose of enabling the researcher to

write down ideas, hunches, and notes about the patterns that seemed to be emerging. These emergent themes led directly in data analysis, initiating the process of reflection and discernment at the point of data collection. The field notes served as an important tool to document thoughts and activities at the time and place, rather than recalling from memory at a later date.

All recorded data was transcribed along with field notes. A thematic analysis design was preferred to the grounded theory approach to understand the social phenomena of the GGSS program itself rather than produce an overarching theory. Data obtained from the interviews, surveys, and observations were triangulated to bolster the study's credibility. Coding was approached not just as a labeling technique, but a way of linking thoughts and actions across bits of data. Through an iterative process spanning six months, over forty initial codes were synthesized into major themes. After a brief explanation of the study's limitations, each of these major themes is presented below. All names are pseudonyms.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations of this study, the most significant of which is possible inaccuracy or misrepresentation in the process of translating between Nepali and English. The researcher encountered some difficulties in the actual interview process itself, as several participants did not speak English fluently, which may have led to their ideas being recorded in a dissimilar manner to their original intention. In addition, some participants did not speak English at all; in which case, the researcher used the assistance of a translator. The difficulties of communication, understanding, and translation may have obscured some of the information spoken by participants.

In a similar vein, the short period of time for the study (three weeks) and researcher's lack of exposure to Nepal prior to the study may have resulted in a gulf in understanding. The researcher had never been to Nepal prior to this study. Without a sophisticated understanding of the nature of the relationship between government schools and foreign agencies in Nepal, the researcher encountered some difficulty in assessing educator's perceptions. Still, the author sought to combat this limitation by learning as much as possible about Nepal and the education system during the course of this study. The author takes sole responsibility for any misunderstanding or misinterpretation of testimony that may remain.

FOR THEMSELVES

For educators in Nepal, becoming an educator was represented as an opportunity to earn an education and learn for themselves. Multiple educators described teaching as the opportunity for continued education. For example, science teacher Deepak Pandel (personal communication, August, 4 2016) explained, "I want to learn by teaching. I engaged in teaching because I want to share my ideas and be updated myself" (p.1). One of the benefits of teaching was seen as getting to feel "up-to-date" and feeling that several educators described. An English language teacher (personal communication, August, 4 2016) said, "So I learned English because I got the chance to learn English language through teaching. I want to be updated myself in language and learning so I engaged in this profession" (p.1). GGSS educators viewed teaching as leading to benefits for teachers themselves, primarily through learning (personal communication, August, 4 2016): "when I share knowledge to these students, at the

same time I am also learning” (p.1). GGSS educators saw their profession as an access to education, knowledge and learning for themselves.

In addition to the desire to learn, GGSS educators also recognized the profession as a means to benefit financially. Mathematics teacher Devi (personal communication, August, 4 2016) stated, “The profession also has an economic allure” (p.1) while another math teacher, Sagar Rana (personal communication, August, 4 2016), agreed, “I want to improve my economic status” (p.1). Nepalese educators viewed the role of being a teacher as an avenue for personal financial benefit, as well as a way to increase the economic capacity of their society. Chandrakaata (personal communication, August, 4 2016), a secondary science teacher, stated, “If prosperity of any society increases then the salary of any educator increases, so it is awesome to be a part of educational institutions” (p.1). In this view, the financial benefit of teaching was seen as benefitting not just society, but the financial standing of teachers in that society. In other words, educators viewed the teaching as a profession that grows the whole pie of the Nepali economy, from which they in turn benefit.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Teachers did not just describe the concept of teacher roles in relation to themselves. Sharing knowledge and giving something to others was an important part of their vision of the profession. When asked why he wanted to become an educator, Abhishek (personal communication, August, 5 2016), a principal, elucidated, “To teach something to others. To give something to others” (p.1). Another educator, Ijon (personal communication, August, 5 2016), reflected these sentiments, explaining, “This was my chosen profession because I want to share my knowledge to the students” (p.1). Abhishek continued and stated his motivation simply, “Sharing the knowledge. Sharing the skills” (p.1). In this sense, teachers viewed their roles as sharing education with others.

Part of the desire of GGSS educators to share knowledge and skills with others was to enable students to become self-sufficient. In this sense, teachers viewed students as individuals, rather than as a group. A teacher named Sriya (personal communication, August, 4 2016) explained, “If any person becomes educated, he or she can do everything what he needs in his life” (p.1). The ability for one to care of oneself in Nepal was seen as an important reason for educating someone. For example, education could lead to increased job possibilities for any one person. As Shyam (personal communication, August, 4 2016), a computer educator explained, “I provide many capabilities in technology sector and improve the students’ knowledge” (p.1). The self-sufficiency of a person was seen as leading to a bright economic future. In addition, individuals who received education would become better positioned to serve the group in the future, potentially even as teachers. These anecdotes demonstrate the way in which educators conceived as their roles as being for individuals to prosper and succeed.

FOR GROUPS

Lastly, providing service to groups was a prominent perspective on teaching roles for GGSS educators. In their conceptualization of groups, educators situated teaching as a profession with broad benefits to be shared by many. As Ijon stated enthusiastically, “Education is the backbone of the life” (p.1). Devi elaborated,

“Teacher is a leader of society. Society guided by teacher. It is a respectable job, service. So I want to be a teacher” (p. 2). Nepalese teachers were dedicated to serving their society and nation. Chandrakaata (personal communication, August, 5 2016) stated, “I want to support my nation” (p.1). Babu Paudel (personal communication, August, 4 2016), a math teacher, reflected this sentiment, “To be a good person and citizen, that’s why I chose to be a teacher” (p.1). Educators indicated a strong desire to shape their students for the betterment of the nation. Science teacher Devid’s prerogative was “to deliver knowledge and learning to students and to make them a good citizen of the country” (p.2). Nationalism was a prominent feature in discussions with GGSS educators on teacher roles and motivations.

The desire to serve society and the nation was also extended to more remote areas of Nepal. Abhishek, a Principal, declared, “I want to provide more and more opportunities to the villagers and other marginalized peoples” (p.2). This dedication to service reflected a sense of responsibility educators gained from their own history of receiving education. A computer teacher (personal communication, August, 4 2016) stated, “Our duty is also to our society, our duty and our knowledge sharing whatever I learned in university or colleges” (p. 2). After attending university, educators viewed their role as that of helping inform other parts of the population. Science and math teacher Kancho (personal communication, August, 5 2016) stated, “Such persons who become educated, those persons who are educated, they can give not only for them but also for others” (p. 1). He even shared a story of his own personal inspiration by a teacher, “I saw our teacher, teacher is model. So I can also be teacher” (p.1). In this way, teachers viewed their roles as serving groups of people in Nepal.

REVIEW

In review, GGSS educators viewed the concept of teacher roles in Nepal in three broad categories. The first category referred to educators themselves. For teachers in Nepal, becoming an educator was depicted as a means for gaining an education, societal status, and a salary for themselves. Secondly, educators viewed the role of teacher as a benefit for the individuals they taught. This conception of teacher roles involved sharing knowledge, providing skills, abilities, and career opportunities, enabling self-sufficiency, and serving as a personal role model from which individuals can benefit. Lastly, educators viewed teacher roles as a service for groups. These opinions positioned educators as being the backbone of society, supporting the nation by educating students for citizenship, empowering marginalized communities, and fulfilling a responsibility for the group by teaching after becoming educated.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

James Farrell’s concept of community education provides a tool for interpreting teacher roles within foreign-funded education programs. In his article “Community Education in Developing Countries: The Quiet Revolution in Schooling,” Farrell (2008) argues there has been a transformation in schooling in the developing world. Farrell refers here to new programs of schooling, operated by Ministries of Education, I/NGOs, or mixed models of government, I/NGO, and civil society groups. Despite the local contexts and differences of the vast number of new educational programs in developing countries, Farrell posits that many of the

students of these programs are achieving greater academic heights than their peers. Based on a study of over 200 of these programs, Farrell's comparative analysis leads towards lessons learned from the "islands of success"—the successful schooling programs in developing countries (p. 371).

Farrell (2008) begins by describing how formal schooling can often be dysfunctional and resistant to change and reform. As Farrell states, "What we have come to understand about human learning has almost nothing to do with how schooling continues to be conducted" (p. 371). As a result of the difficulties of change in many systems of education, many students, educators, and citizens have become frustrated with the system. It seems as though much of the research and advancement in thinking about teaching and learning continues to exist in a vacuum, having little to no affect on the formal schooling system. The author writes, "Whatever the explanation here, the phenomena remains; whatever we learn about learning, schooling systems of the traditional sort seem generally unable to significantly change" (p. 374). This unfortunate situation, Farrell concludes, is the struggle for all action for educational reform.

Despite the difficulty of change, Farrell (2008) shows that a quiet revolution in schooling is developing on the margins of the standard education system. Typically, these programs develop amongst groups where standard school has yet to find the best means of promoting learning and education. Farrell cites three examples from the developing world of this quiet revolution in education, including Escuela Nueva (New School) in Colombia, The Non-Formal Primary Education Program of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, and The Community Schools Program of UNICEF in Egypt. Farrell highlights these programs as examples of the many similar type of programs taking place across the developing world. In comparing the results of the programs, Farrell writes, "In all of these cases extremely poor children come to school, stay in school, finish the primary cycle, and learn not only the necessary academic materials and skills, but also develop self-confidence and self-esteem and in large proportions carry on to the next level of formal education" (p. 377). In general, students in these programs achieve superior level to their peers from more advantaged social backgrounds.

Teachers in these successful programs are generally not formally certified according to the standard system of teacher education. Rather, they are often young, female, have a modest degree of education, and are locally known individuals. Farrell (2008) explains, "They are very much of the community and known to the community" (p. 378). This familiarity provides leverage for effective education. Teachers use the standard national curriculum, but by altering their pedagogy, provide students opportunities to learn quicker as well as incorporate local relevance. In the end, the result of the teacher's effort is a tremendous benefit for students in their social, economic, and biological lives. Farrell writes, "Since all of these programs have achieved considerable success in improving student access, survival, and most important learning, this suggests that various degrees and combinations of moves away from the traditional model, suited to local conditions and traditions, can be successful" (p. 383). This assertion is not intended to prescribe a one-size-fits-all model, but rather serve as a strong contrast to the standard model, and to point towards a new framework for teacher roles—one which resonates with the empirical evidence of this study.

The lessons learned from Farrell's (2008) comparative study speak to the power of civil society to change the educational landscape through new models of schooling. He begins, "The most important thing these alternative programs teach us is that the traditional model can be changed on a large scale" (p. 383). A child-centered approach, with active pedagogy and heavy involvement from parents and community members, has been proven to be effective. This approach, even on a small scale, can have large impacts on disadvantaged students. These programs represent not just an addition to, or reform of, the formal system of schooling, but a holistic implementation of a revisioning of education itself. Teachers become the agents of, rather than obstacles to, change. Teachers learn from other teacher and by sharing their professional practice, enhance the effects of their impact. Farrell argues that children do not have to be forced or coerced into learning—it is what they do naturally. While traditional school tries to channel the desire to learn, these new programs aim to unleash it.

CONCLUSION

Farrell's work assists in fully interpreting educators' perceptions of teacher roles within the U.S. funded education program in Nepal explored in this study. By explaining the force through which community education and alternative schooling methods are changing education globally—the "quiet revolution"—Farrell's study provides explanatory power and context for the GGSS program in Nepal. In this light, GGSS can be viewed as simply one manifestation of a new educational phenomena spreading across the globe. However, with this transformation come new pressures, dynamics, and conceptions of the purpose and practice of teaching. These foreign-funded educational programs, I argue, usher in powerful new discourses about development—narratives with which educators adopt, wrestle, and reshape.

The empirical findings explored in this study point to a conception of teacher identity engaged conceptually with discourses of development—the narrative often told about Nepal by development actors elaborated at the onset of this study. I argue that teachers' view of themselves and their profession were in part intended to represent themselves as competent, rational subjects to an outsider (namely, me, the researcher). I interpret these perspectives as expressing awareness on the part of educators of the rapidly changing educational landscape of community education articulated by Farrell, and the economic benefit that can come with development projects. As the material and socio-cultural contexts of education change through these programs, in Nepal and around the world, new foreign actors, power relations, and potentials shape educators' perspectives on their profession, to which they in turn respond, use, and reshape.

Accordingly, educators' conceptions of teacher roles expressed a desire for upward mobility and membership in Nepal's emerging, and indeed emerged, middle class (Liechty, 2003). Command of the English language was judged as crucial in this regard. In addition, teachers situated their work within a national project of producing productive citizens for the Nepali state. Educators expressed visions of themselves as engaged in national civil society. As a part of this society, teachers saw themselves as serving marginalized communities, fostering the individual economic goals of their students, and acquiring a plethora of knowledge and skills themselves. These perspectives, I argue, reflect the changed educational landscape of community

education. Teacher identity in this new terrain is made to accommodate the power of development discourse, with which educators can manage, contest, or utilize (Chatterjee, 2001). Educators' perspective showed evidence of multiple ways of interacting with the power of development discourse and practice in Nepal.

While educators' perceptions were shaped by development, as I argued above, teachers also exercised a sense of agency in the context of the GGSS program. Teachers enthusiastically adopted the role of sharing knowledge with their students and delivering skills to villagers. They viewed themselves as role models, leaders, and the backbone of society. They connected their own financial benefit to the economic benefit of others. While reflecting the development discourse inherent in the situational context of the U.S. funded program, teachers reshaped, appropriated, and employed the dominant rhetoric to connect to and further their own calling as educators. Reflecting Ayers' description on teacher identity, experience, and vocational calling, this study shows that in the face of the structure of a transnational development program, educators in Nepal negotiated their identities to fit the motivations of their vocation.

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