

Editorial**Cultural Gap in Education: Making Education Unresponsive to the Local Needs**

Nepal's School Sector Reform Program (SSRP) that guided the education development initiatives in the country during the period 2009-15 envisioned that by 2015 "a student has basic life skills to co-exist in the competitive contemporary, global society" (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2008, p. 17). Going further, the Program also noted that its goals are built on "EFA Framework of Action" (p. 18). The global orientation of the reform program was thus very clear. Envisioning to prepare the children for global society and following an EFA framework emphasize the global orientation of Nepali education. The SSRP was not the only plan with global orientation; the first Nepali education development plan prepared in 1955 also had the same orientation. The plan had written "we have become a part of the world, whether we like it or not. We can no longer remain isolated; the world has come to us. How can we meet this world without education?" (Pandey, K.C., & Wood, 1956, p. 83). The global orientation was thus not a new phenomenon in Nepali education and the dream towards becoming international has been there in Nepali education consistently. Continuing with the same dream, SSRP presented the strategy of competitive and contemporary global education for Nepal and Nepalis.

This strong urge towards becoming international needs to be understood both in the national and international contexts. The same 1955 plan had emphasized that education, in the sense of modern school education, was the only available option for achieving a modernized and developed Nepal. Modernization and development therefore have been the prime national agenda in the post 1950 Nepal and the state has adopted the schooled education as one of the key strategies for achieving these goals. Periodic development plans implemented in Nepal have also consistently emphasized the role of education in development. There was even the slogan of 'education for development' (Ministry of Education, 1971). All such enthusiasm on education and development was to convince the people that by going through the modern schooled education they would enjoy the development of international standard. During the 1980s, the country even adopted the slogan of 'Asian Standard' (Bista, 1999). The claim was that with the state development policy, the country will arrive at the Asian standard of development – a dream given to the poverty stricken people by the state elites. The implicit objective behind all these efforts towards internationalization of education and development in the country was to legitimize the state authority (Shrestha, 1997, p. 65). It has been argued that the states derive their logic and rationale for authority, power, and privilege by delivering growth and

development to its people (Shanin, 1997). The growth of schooling in any country also illustrates the power dynamics among different interest groups in the society. The group that holds the power always tries to design schooling as per their own interest and as their efforts towards easing their ruling process (Boli, Ramirez, & Meyer, 1985).

Nepal's drive for going international with its modern schooling was actually in line with the international trend. Modern schooling has been one of the dramatic phenomena in the world. In its history of about 200 years, the state supported modern schooling proliferated in such a way that probably there is no community in the world that is beyond the influence of the schooling directly or indirectly. Though millions of children are still out of school in the world, it has become an integral part of everyday life of many other children all over the world. Going to school, participating in its activities, and preparing themselves for their future life has become an essential routine for all children. Beginning from around 3-4 years of age, children spend about 10 or even 20 years of their life in schools of one or other level. In several contexts, their schooling continues till they arrive at adulthood and even old age in the form of lifelong learning. Of course, for many children in developing countries their schooling life confines to just a few years. The lives of those who could not participate in schooling are considered 'wasted', and that they are stigmatized as 'illiterate'.

Schooling is now accepted as one of the state responsibilities all over the world as it has been considered one of the fundamental human rights. Following this, schooling has now become a big industry both at the international and national levels. Probably the largest number of people are involved in it than in any other sector – including students, teachers, managers, bureaucrats, researchers, etc. It is probably one of the largest employment providers in the world and is also one of the biggest fund receivers from the states. If we include the investment made by individuals, household, communities, private sectors, etc. the size of expenditure made on activities related to schooling further increases substantially. Several institutions and organizations have been developed internationally and in countries to provide schooling services to people. While ministries, departments, and other specialized agencies are common in most countries, organizations like UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), etc. are prominent at the global level. There are also I/NGOs, universities, private sector organizations, etc. at the national and international levels.

These institutions and organizations prepare goals and objectives and plans and programs for schooling as well as define visions and missions, coin the slogans, define the indicators and set targets for the activities related to schooling. Setting the monitoring procedures and criteria and carrying out monitoring and evaluation of the plans and programs are also the functions of these institutions. Likewise, they also carry out independent research, assessment of student learning as well as performance and efficiency of particular plan or of the whole system and declare what has become successful and what

has remained failure. These national and international institutions and organizations are thus the key actors, or better to term 'key facilitating/controlling agencies' for schooling.

It is natural to assume that countries design and develop their schooling as per their own needs and contexts. As schooling has been considered a strategy for developing socio-economic situations in any country, it needs to be designed to boost the national needs and demands. Schooling has not only been a means for development but also linked with several other aspects like national identity and pride, values and principles, and hopes and dreams. Naturally, then, it is expected that schooling in any country supports achieving all these. For this, it is anticipated that components and procedures of schooling like structure, curriculum, teaching, assessment, etc. be in line with the national needs and context. Moreover, as there are political, economic, and socio-cultural differences within a country, its schooling needs to be able to address these differences. Otherwise, schooling in any country might not actually be able to support the national socio-economic transformation. This demands that schooling in any country be a national/local project.

The reality, however, is different. Unlike expectations of all, schooling in most countries has not remained a national project. It has become less a national project and more a global project. "In spite of the fact that nations (and their subunits, provinces and states) have immediate political and fiduciary control over schooling, education as an institution has become a global enterprise" (Baker & LeTendre, 2005, p. 3). This is so because structure and design of schooling and its content and procedures in any country are now largely determined more by global forces and less by national and local forces making schools and their design in any part of the world fundamentally the same, making the schools "isomorphic"¹ (Baker & Wiseman, 2006; Pritchett, 2014). Wiseman and Baker (2006) have maintained that "remarkable expansion of education has fostered notable homogeneity of goals, aims, and basic organizational forms of elementary and secondary schooling and, more recently, higher education" (p. 2). Be it countries like Nepal or like China, Singapore, Brazil, and France, or like Lesotho, Afghanistan, and Solomon Island, basic features of schooling in these countries are largely similar. Their curriculum, instructional modes, assessment practices, organization, governance and management, etc. display basically the same pattern. Irrespective of their political, governance and socio-economic policy and practice, no countries in the world are in the situation to ignore the forces of globalization, world trend, and global systems and institutions. All countries in the world, in one or the other way, are obliged to follow the global path. This global path is actually Anglo-American education system, curriculum policy, and assessment practice (Autio, 2012). Autio further asserts that the world has adopted the "American model – where competition, teaching to the test, accountability, standardization, and privatization seem to dominate" (para. 10). This is how it seems that the schooling in the countries in the world are organized.

Going global is probably not wrong in itself; the wrong is ignoring the local context and needs while trying to go global. In the name of preparing our students for a competitive global world and in the name of quality and standardization, we are ignoring the local cultural context and thus the whole design of schooling and its content and processes are being culturally incompatible. It has long been accepted that the socio-cultural context, traditions, and history of the area/nation are the key aspects in understanding the educational system in any area (Husén, 1967, as cited in Baker & LeTendre, 2005). It is obvious that the present isomorphic world schools cannot address the diversities the nations of the world are characterized of. One highly contradictory aspect of the world schooling is that while people, to whom the schooling is supposed to serve, are diverse themselves and are in highly diverse contexts – socio-culturally as well as naturally; the schooling itself is highly isomorphic irrespective of where they are. This makes it very obvious that the schooling itself and its context are not in accordance.

Hence, the present form of schooling has largely remained failed or unable to address the needs of a large majority of the children around the world, particularly of those who are politically, socially, culturally, and economically in deprived situations and to whom the schools are supposed to serve. This ignoring of local context and needs in designing of the schooling is one of the reasons why children's participation is low in schools, why they leave their schools early, and why their learning has often remained poor in many countries – a common problem of many developing countries. Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (GMR) of 2015 has noted that about 58 million primary age group children are still out of school and about 100 million do not complete primary school (UNESCO, 2015). Regarding learning, EFA GMR 2013/14 has noted that “unless policy-makers in all countries implement measures designed to improve learning for all, another generation of children and young people will be denied their right to a good quality education” (UNESCO, 2014, p. 190). This was so because the learning at the international level has been described as “incredibly low” and even “awful” in some countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Pritchett, 2014). These realities clearly suggest that amidst much claimed success and achievements, there are serious challenges and drawbacks in our globalized schooling system.

Based upon the discussion above, it can be argued that there are some fundamental lapses in the design of schooling. One such lapse is the cultural gap – the mismatch between the schooling and its content and process on the one hand and the context of the local area and the people whom the schooling is supposed to support to develop on the other. In other words, the cultural gap is the gap between the values and worldviews, the knowledge tradition, and everyday practices of the people on the one hand and the values and the perspectives the schooling has been attempting to develop in the children on the other. While the people's values and worldviews are derived from their long knowledge traditions, livelihood, their obligations towards their nature, place, and society, the

isomorphic schooling has been promoting the globalized values that have little relevance to the needs and context of the local people. This sort of cultural gap thus explains why people are less interested in schooling as illustrated by their limited participation in and early leaving from the schooling.

Even if some children/youths in countries like Nepal who somehow continue with their schooling and complete some levels do not find a job for them since very few jobs are available because of the poor national economic situation. They are also not able to create their own job because their schooling does not develop such capacity in them. Moreover, as we have been experiencing, schooling has been detaching a large number of youths from their traditional livelihood which is most commonly related with farming and related jobs. That is why, large areas of agricultural land have remained barren in many parts in Nepal. Schooled youths are no more interested in working in the field and are after some 'jobs'. There is even a common saying in some communities in Nepal that goes something like 'a schooled son is a lost one'.

This sort of situation must be changed. If we expect that schooling contributes to enhance the quality of our life, the cultural gap that lie between schooling and the people/area it serves must be filled-in. For this, schooling must be designed in accordance with the local cultural context and must respond to the needs of the local people. This does not mean that we deny the forces of globalization. Of course, we meet the globalization but by maintaining our 'localness'.

Note

¹Isomorphic or isomorphism in education means similarities in design, content, inputs, process, and outputs of educational systems. Isomorphism can also be seen as the tendencies (forceful or voluntary) to be in line with other systems, often the powerful ones.

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