



Educational Ceiling in a Rural Tamang Community in Nepal: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

This research study conducted in a rural Tamang community of Nepal aims to explore the real dynamics behind school dropout. The school drop-out is an act of stopping children from going to school after a couple of years of school attainment. A qualitative approach with ethnographic method was adopted to study the school dropout phenomenon. Data were collected over a prolonged stay where observations, in-depth interviews, interactions with research participants and focus group discussions (FGDs) were major data collection tool to understand this phenomenon more closely and to interpret it in relation to culture of the Tamang community. This research claims that various factors related to school, household, parents and children themselves revealed by earlier research studies as cause of school dropout are simply the enabling factors, which in combine, construct a more abstract dynamics, i.e. educational ceiling. The educational ceiling refers to the minimum level of education the people think that they must attain in their life. Actually, this dynamics guides individuals in evaluating the relevance of education in their lives and to take the decision of dropout accordingly. This finding was explored from the cultural artifices of the Tamang community and their way of setting their educational ceiling, employing the inter-actionist approach. This study implies that the scope of the dropout issue is beyond the education system. As and when these individual and society's contexts change, the educational ceiling of individual also changes and, thus, the dropout scenario changes accordingly.

Key words: Tamang community, educational ceiling and school dropout.

Setting for the Study: The Rural Tamang Community

I found a rural Tamang community located not very far from the Kathmandu metropolis an ideal location in many respects to study the dynamics of the out-of-school phenomenon in Nepal. Before discussing the location, a little background of the Tamang community would shed some meaningful backgrounds to understand the dynamics of the out-of-school phenomenon more closely. Tamang, with population of roughly 1.5 million according to the 2011 census, is the fifth largest ethnic group in Nepal. Historically, Tamangs had migrated from Tibet and are mainly settled in the hilly areas of Nepal's central and eastern regions. The word 'Tamang' was originally derived from 'Ta Ma', where 'Ta' means horse and 'Ma' means soldier in the Tibetan language. They were groups of soldiers on horse defending the Tibetan borders. I selected this ethnic community of this particular area for study with three rationales. First, the Tamang community is one of the most deprived ethnic groups in Nepal with a comparatively low human development index and low literacy rate. I have hardly seen or heard about Tamang people who have occupied

the senior positions in politics or bureaucracy or in any other fields. I thought that there might be some relation between their educational status and social status in national scenario.

Second, located just 15 km far from the heart of Kathmandu, reaching to this particular area, I felt that I was in a typical Nepalese rural area. From the gate way of the community, it took me two hours to climb up the hill through a dense forest to reach their place. I was with full of sweat while reaching to their place. Although there was a mud road to reach the community, I did not see any vehicle running on the road. Many villagers including small children were walking in this difficult geography carrying some loads at their back. Peoples' clothing, their housing condition and peoples' engagement in filed and farm gave me an impression that these people must have low income and low living standards with a harsh living.

The third reason for selecting this community was the high incidence of school dropout among them. The secondary data sources showed a severe incidence of out of school children in this particular area and I did a cohort study to explore further the general dropout situation in the community. The situation was alarming. Out of 20 students enrolled in grade one in 2005, only 2 (10 %) had reached to grade 10 without any grade repetition in 2014 and 6 students were at grade nine with one time class repetition in their school life. The rest of the students had permanently dropped out from the system. Many of those were already married and some of them had children as well. Talking to the community people, I realized that this alarming situation of school dropout was very normal to them and no own was found regretting on their decision of school dropout. Thus, I decided to take this community for further exploration of the school dropout issue. Then I started to explore the livelihood of the community by asking different people associated with the community. Historically, farming was their main occupation for many households. Living in the centre of the jungle, cutting trees and selling the wood in the market was the side business to meet their daily expenses. In addition, they would go to surrounding areas in the plain land and work as agricultural labour during the cropping and harvesting seasons. Cutting tree is now prohibited due to the policy of national park, but still the surrounding forest has an important value in their livelihood. They collect various forest products for their household purposes, hiding from security personnel.

From the interaction with the villagers, I felt that still farming was considered as their main occupation, where they needed to engage the whole year. Maize and millet were the main crops while they used rice for daily consumption. Agriculture was neither benefiting them nor giving sufficient income to meet their daily expenses. But, keeping their land barren was associated with the prestige of the people. To sustain their agricultural occupation, animal husbandry (either cow or goat) was essential, which was more cumbersome and time-consuming, making people's life not only busy but hard. Thus people were no more interested in this occupation. However, they were accustomed to this occupation and not been able to discard it. A few of the families were employed in the Nepali Army and some youth had gone to Malaysia or Gulf countries for employment. Especially youth were interested in these two areas. Making alcohol at home and selling it in the market was a side business and reliable income source for their daily expenses. I saw plenty of marijuana plants in some fields as well, and many youth would come from Kathmandu city area to buy these plants. This was another source of income for some families. People were aware that engagement in both these activities, selling alcohol and farming and selling marijuana, were illegal, but still this was important part of their life.

More than 90 percent of the families were Tamang in this community, and most of them used to communicate in their own mother tongue. However, school was fully a Nepali medium school. Marriage at the age of 15 or 16 was still a common practice in the area. Despite the low income of the people, there was a trend of high spending on various rites and rituals, even by taking loan from the market. Generally, 'Ghewa' (death rites) was the most expensive event for them. There were many examples that the death of some members of the family was necessarily pushing the family into debt. In terms of educational status, I found a major shift in the community. There were found hardly any person above the age of 40 or 50 who had been to school in their time. But, at present, I did not find even a single school age child who had never been to school. Until a few years ago, they used to go to school at the age of seven or eight. As a result, in general, they would become at least 15 or 16 years at the time of completing the lower secondary level schooling. On the other hand, this age was the age for them to marry. In recent years, however, the trend has changed and a significant improvement has taken place in starting school around the right age. Now, going to school and studying at least some years had already become a social norm of the community.

Likewise, if one looked at the trend till a few years ago, many children were found leaving school after grade 5 as the school existed in their community was only up to primary level. Now, this level has been raised to grade 8, along with upgrading the school from primary (grade 5) to lower secondary (grade 8). Children needed to walk one or two hours to the down town for secondary education. The Census 2011 reports that, among 5-16 year-old children, 80 percent boys and 76 percent girls were attending school (CBS, 2012). Many girls were found married while studying grade 7 or 8 and then dropping out of school. In some cases, girls were found dropping out from school after studying grade 7 or 8 and then in next one or two years getting married and starting their married life. Moreover, love marriage during the school-going age was found in an increasing trend. One could find some girls in the village who had become mother at the age of 16 or 17. Most of them had dropped out from school before completing secondary level education. In case of boys, there was a great attraction towards joining the Nepali Army. So, many boys were found trying to enter Nepali Army soon after completing grade 8. If they did not succeed, then they would make passport and try to go abroad for work. The young were found having no attraction towards their traditional occupation. They would engage in their traditional occupation only if no other alternatives were available.

Exit from the Field: Connecting to Issue

During the very first conversation with *Maili*, 42 years old, she said very boldly, "I worked very hard for my children's education. Now I have got prize of my labour". Therefore, I thought that her children might have completed at least bachelor's or master's level of education and they got highly paid job. Later, I came to know that her daughter had completed only grade 7 and her son only grade 8. When I said, "This much only?" She said, "Yes, this is enough for them to run their life successfully. I am proud of them for their accomplishment as both of them have started their new life successfully which better than other people of this society." It made me more interested to explore why *Maili* stopped her children before completing school level education and how she was happy with this level of formal education.

The expression of *Maili* made me more interested to understand why she stopped her children's schooling before completing school level education and how attaining this level of education made her happy. Then I reviewed some literature on the school dropout issue of the world. There were no societies in the world where every citizen would attempt up to the last grade available in the education system. Leaving school or college after certain years of formal education

was a global phenomenon. But dropping out from formal education system before completing certain grades was considered as problem everywhere in the world. Developed and rich countries are concerned about school leaving in higher education where strict conditions are set for dropping out as school level education is mandatory by law. The young people of age 16-24, both in the USA and Ireland, leave school without necessary qualifications (James, 2005). The dropout phenomenon is considered a problem as it creates disadvantage not only to the individual (e.g. unemployment, low paid job, not active citizen) but also generates large 'social costs' such as wastage of resources, social breakdown, social security programme and lower social cohesion (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER]. 2003; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; European Commission [EC], 2010). Thus, the issue of school dropout in developed countries is viewed from the perspective of personal and societal benefits. But developing countries like Nepal is concerned from developmental perspective of school dropout where school age children leave school before completing basic level education. The basic education is considered both ends and means of development which also the basic human rights of people (Haq & Haq, 1998).

Considering school dropout as serious concern, Nepal has taken various efforts from constitutional provisions for the development of programme and policy to provide school level education to all citizens. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has specified free and compulsory education up to basic level and free education up to secondary level as the state responsibility (Secretariat of Legislative Parliament [SLP], 2015). Likewise, spending a large share of public expenditure on school education, more than 34,000 schools are providing school education to its citizens (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2015). Parents need pay neither school fees nor textbooks for school level education, whereas needy and marginalized groups of children are provided scholarships and other facilities such as day meal and uniform (Department of Education [DoE], 2013; Dynamic Institute of Research and Development [DIRD], 2014). Despite the provisions of all these facilities, both national level census and survey data (CBS, 2011; CBS, 2012) showed a considerable numbers of children leaving school without completing school level education. This situation is verified in field as well.

Need for Exploring the Crux

Considering the seriousness of the issue, many research studies have been conducted at past to explore the reasons for school dropout in Nepal. Almost all research studies have shown a wide range of factors ranging from school- to household- and children/parents-related characters as responsible factors for pushing out children from school or blocking children from stepping in school (Full Bright Consultancy [FBC], 2012; International Research on Working Children [IREWOC], 2007; Kushiya, 2007; MoE, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2016). Even the single research identifies a long list causes responsible for the school dropout. The common causes of dropout as reported by the key respondents were: poverty, household chores, illiteracy, lack of awareness among parents, inability to afford stationery and books, inability to feed children in time, looking after younger siblings, failure in examination, no interest or difficulty in study, more interest of children in play than in study, work in the field and cattle grazing, lack of functional education, fear of unemployment, parental indifference towards school education, poor physical facilities in school, child labour, early marriage, gender discrimination, lack of school uniform, engagement in traditional work, social discrimination, traditional customs, beliefs and practices, no/little incentive for girls, lack of adequate number of teachers in school and overage/underage of children (Teacher Educators' Society - Nepal [TESON], 2004, p. 5).

One of the most highlighted reasons shown by almost every study in Nepal over the period is poor economic condition or poverty of parents (Department of Education [DoE], World Education [WE] & UNICEF, 2012; Improving the Educational Efficiency [IIES] & Ministry of Education, Culture and Social Welfare [MOESW], 1993; Kushiyait, 2007; Manandhar & Sthapit, 2012; MoE, UNICEF and UNESCO). Blaming poor economic condition for school dropout does not seem convincing at least in two ways. First, the costs of food and shelter are much higher than the cost of schooling in community schools, where school fee is completely waved and textbooks are provided at free of cost. Then, how can be the low income of parents blamed for drop-out when the family is able to feed their children and not able to send their children to school? Second, parents who are not been able to finance few thousands rupees for their children's schooling can manage few hundred thousand rupees to send them abroad for work. So, there might be something else which is the major reason for drop-out. The aforementioned people practices raise several questions in mind. Is finding school education economically unproductive a rational decision of parents? Is it that parents see no benefit in sending their children to school compared to involving them in household chores? Or is it that parents see high opportunity cost of sending their children to school against the expected benefit from it? So, further exploration is needed to understand the relationship between the low income of families and school dropout.

Likewise, another common reason identified by earlier research studies on dropout of children was the lack of awareness among parents (IIES & MoESW, 1993; Jnawali, 2010; Kushiyait, 2007; Wagle, 2012,). Still, this finding is not convincing. How can we blame parents for their children's dropping-out of school because they were the same persons who had enrolled their children and sent them to school for a couple of years. Cannot it be a result of the perceived value of education in their lives? Cannot it be the result of cost and benefit experienced and analysed by parents? Cannot it be the rational choice taken by parents pursuing that becoming out of school is a better choice than continuing school? Is it not possible that children feel happier while becoming out of school than continuing school? Are people finding the existing school-level education relevant to their life? Is it helping to pursue their life's goal such as rise in standard of living with better good job prospects, better income and higher social status? Based on these unanswered questions, I assumed that there was lack of an understanding about the real dynamics that lead to the decision to drop out of school. These multiple factors could simply be the enabling factors for drop-out constructing a more abstract dynamics. Hence, the quest of this research was to explore that dynamics of school drop-out more than on the factors associated with it.

Interacting with Participants: Methodology

The school dropout is a phenomenon of stopping children from going to school after a couple of years of school attainment. Parents send their children to school with some expectations and after a couple of years they or/and children may find it not a right action or find some better option rather than sending their children to school. From starting school to ending it, parents and children experience a series of events and interact with many people and contexts which in combine created a background for the decision of school dropout or to continue school. Thus, dropping out of school is a phenomenon rather than any spontaneous event.

Regular visits to the research site for six months and rigorous interactions with research participants helped to understand this phenomenon more closely and to interpret it in relation to the Tamang community. Thus, data were collected over a prolonged stay and observations and in-depth interviews were made with some families at the research site. In addition, focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews were conducted with a number of students, teachers and local

people in order to pursue the objectives of this study. This article basically takes the help of six stories of three school dropout children where these dropout stories are representative stories of the community. Although these participants expressed one or two reasons explicitly as responsible for their school dropout decision, I found multiple factors and circumstances implicitly, during interviewing them, intertwined to motivate them for the school dropout during the interview. Thus finding of this research study is my reflective understanding I constructed based on their meanings to school education and strategies to drop out from school after attaining some years of schooling.

Findings: Educational Ceiling as Major Dynamics of School Dropout Phenomenon

Based on in depth interviews with research participants and a prolonged stay in the field, I found that there were some common perceptions of, and some expectations from, the value of school education in their lives. These perceptions of the value of education in their children's lives form their level of expectations, which I have termed here as **Educational Ceiling** and this is the major dynamics of school dropout. Educational ceiling is the minimum level of formal education that people consider essential in order to run their life comfortably. These ceilings varied not only from family to family but also from individual to individual. The families in my research site could broadly be categorized into three levels of ceiling.

First Ceiling: School Education for Literacy

The first ceiling in the community was to become literate in letter and numeracy from school education. The understanding of school education and action taken by *Kanchha*, a common story of many families of the community, was guided by this first educational ceiling (see Box 1).

Box 1. Narrative Information

Kanchha, 46years old and father of three children never thought of continuing his children's schooling above grade 8. His elder son, *Badhyata*, left school last year. *Badhyata* failed to join the Nepali Army and now he has been trying to go abroad for work. This is their strategy to pay back the family loan. They had taken one Lakh rupees loan when *Badhyat's* mother became sick and another one Lakh rupees during her death rituals. *Badhyata* married with one grade junior friend of his school when his mother died. This was the strategy of father and son to hand over the role of *Badhyata's* mother. But she eloped with another person when *Badhyata* planned to go abroad. So, *Kanchha* made up his mind to stop his elder daughter from going to school, who is then studying at grade 7. It was the only option for them in order to run the household and to do the agriculture. The family needs at least 150 workdays for their agricultural work and a fulltime to carry the household chores. *Kanchha* had a further plan to marry off his elder daughter in three years and replace her by his younger daughter in managing household chores and farm work. It means he is stopping his younger daughter as well after three years who is now studding at grade 5. *Kanchha* went to school only for a year and dropped out from grade one. He had many bitter experiences in his life due to lack of illiteracy of letter and numeracy. This life experience had motivated him to send all his children to school. *Kanchha* believed that once the children, especially daughters, learnt to read and write and basic numeracy skill, it was enough for them to run their lives and their family after marriage. He said, "Daughter's role is basically to help their parents in farming and household chores before marriage and they have almost the same role even after they go to their husband's home. Even sons are not getting any jobs here, so, it is meaningless to send daughters for higher education with a hope to get employment elsewhere beyond agriculture."

There were many parents like *Kanchha* in the community, whose expectation from school education was acquiring literacy and numeracy skills. Literacy was considered as an essential part of life. As a result, there was not a single child of school-going age in the community who had

never been to school. Education was considered beneficial, as well as essential for performing the basic and primary functions of the family. Although every participant expressed the role of education as being very wide such as 'an eye opener' in every aspect of life, the specific benefits they perceived from school was to acquire skills in letter literacy and numeracy. In addition, literacy was understood as a symbol of being civilized. Whether a person could sign or use thumb impression was the demarcation of social status/prestige in the community. This was a motivating factor for attending adult literacy classes even at the age of 40 or above. Many adults were found attending adult literacy classes and their achievement was judged by whether they were able to sign their name or not.

This level of ceiling was understood as adequate for women rather than for men. This was guided by the common understanding of the distinct division of social role between men and women in the community. The scope of women was considered a limited one – go to husband's home, give birth to children and do household chores. On the other hand, the role of men was considered a little broader: go outside for working and manage the financial aspect of the family. This social division of work between men and women was accepted and acknowledged by every member of the community. As a result, the success of a female member of the family was judged on the basis of inner management of the household, while that of men was viewed on the basis of the income he earned to run the household.

Interactions with other parents gave me an impression that they were not much concerned about their daughters quitting school before completing school level education. The girls who had dropped out of school also had no regrets for dropping out. They were happy that schooling had capacitated them to run their home and the family. Furthermore, they did not consider attempting higher education as their assigned role could be met even from the primary level of education.

The Second Ceiling: School Education for Accessing Employment

The second ceiling was to expect some employment outside agriculture and regular income from school education. From the interview with *Maili*, I understood she expected not only to make her son literate from school education but also to make him eligible to get employment beyond their traditional work (see Box 2).

Box 2. Narrative Information

Maili did her best to send her children to school as she herself had faced many problems at various places due to her lack of literacy and numeracy skills. She had not only felt ashamed many times when someone would ask her to put her signature on paper but she was also afraid to put her thumb impression as she did not know what was written. *Maili* did not bother on her daughter, *Swikarya's* decision - dropout at grade seven. She thought that the literacy skill she gained from primary level of education was enough to perform her role in husband's house. Her son was also about to quit school after grade seven. So she convinced him not to quit school, as she thought education below grade 8 was not sufficient for a son. Despite, he quit school and went to town for work. So, she requested the head teacher of the school to let her son appear in the final examination of grade 8. The head teacher listen her request allow her son to attain the exam even he did not go to school for a single day. Once her son got the certificate of grade 8, *Maili* sent him to the house of *Thulosaab* (senior army officer) to work as a household helper. He worked there for three years, served the army officer and made him happy. As a result, his son was recruited as a 'sipahi' (the lowest position in military service of Nepal) with the influence of the office. This was her strategy to acquire power. Now, her son is getting regular salary and he would receive pension after his retirement. She is proud in front of her neighbours as her strategy worked well to run the life of their children successfully where school education, she thinks, played an important role.

For some parents like *Maili*, literacy was a necessary but not sufficient condition to run a family, for which permanent employment and a reliable source of income were necessary. People were fed up with their traditional occupation of farming, which was, on one hand, a life of hardship and, on the other hand, economically a less productive sector. Thus, escaping from farming and getting some permanent type of job and ensuring a regular income source was the intermediate level of expectation from education for some parents.

The people of my research site had got very little opportunity for exposure to the outer world and they had seen some Army families whose life was considered better than those of the common people with farming occupation. Becoming a *Sipahi* in the Army was an attraction for the local people in three ways. First, it was a permanent employment with regular income where the nature of work was more comfortable than agricultural work. Second, pension was available even after retirement. On top of this, becoming Army personnel was a symbol of social prestige. Once a person entered the Army service (*sipahi*), it was possible to make some networking with the power that be, which would open later opportunities for employment to other family members as well. But grade 8 was a prerequisite to enter the Nepali Army; thus, many children and parents sought to complete grade 8 by hook or by crook. Hence, at my research site, completion of grade 8 was the second level of ceiling. This ceiling was considered appropriate for boys whose social role was different from that of girls. The role of male members of the family was to manage the financial aspect. This was the common practice in the community as *Sahanshila's* family practiced. This family did best to let their two sons to complete school education. They were looking to go abroad after they failed to get any employment beyond agriculture. They were neither helping at parents nor getting any job. Both of them were trying to go abroad and the father was struggling to manage loan to send them abroad. On the other hand, the family was happy with *Sahanshila* even though she had quit school before school education. Since her dropout, she was fully helping her parents from household chores to agriculture including selling alcohol in the market. These parents were looking for a suitable groom for her.

The Third Ceiling: School Education for Earning Power, Prestige and Property

The interaction with *Sipahi Ba* was totally different from other research participants. He told, "These villagers are ignorant on the role of education and stop their children's schooling before school level education." He further told that education is the means of everything in human life: power, prestige and property" This was the highest level of educational ceiling. The following educational ceiling (see Box 3) constructed on *Sipahi Ba* showed that some parent had understood school education as a panacea to meeting every wish of people.

Box 3. Narrative Information

Although *Resham* had passed SLC examinations a few years ago, his father -*Sipahi Ba*, an ex-serviceman of the Nepali Army, was not satisfied. He sent *Resham* to town for higher education as it was not possible in their village. It was costly to attend higher education where *Resham* had to rent a room and bear several other additional costs. However, he sacrificed all for *Resham's* future. *Sipahi Ba* had seen the glamour of senior army officers in terms of power, prestige and property. His '*Sipahi*' post was nothing compared to those of senior army officers. He knew that at least higher secondary education was a prerequisite to joining the Nepali Army as an officer. So, he did his best for his children's education to materialize his dream. But even after trying three times to enter the Nepali Army as an officer, *Resham* failed and returned to his village. He is now engaged in making local alcohol like other school dropouts. *Resham* further concludes, "Only academic qualification is not enough to enter the service. Either you need money to bribe the people or you should have senior army officers as your close relatives."

But, for some parents, higher level education was essential to bring meaningful changes in life. If one was to free their children from their traditional lifestyle and occupation, one should have a higher educational degree. The highest level of educational ceiling found in my research site was to complete school level education (SLC) or grade 12. The people who aspired of posts above '*sipahi*', or those who had gone to Gulf countries for work, were found having this educational ceiling. These three ceilings had developed based on experience, exposure and socioeconomic circumstances where economic condition was perceived as the most influencing factor by the participants. Most of the parents and children expressed that dropping out of school by their children was the result of their poor economic condition.

Evolution of Ceiling

I found very few parents above 50 years who were literate or who hardly had attended school. Interactions with research participants, however, indicated that attending school had become a common idea. This was the starting point of constructing educational ceiling in the area. Historically, farming and selling forest products were their primary occupations where these people had not seen any connection of education with these means of livelihood. There was a common concept that going to school was the business of so-called higher caste people such as Brahman and Chhetri. Beyond these traditional occupations, these Tamang people had some connections with the '*Pipa Goshwara*' section of the Nepali Army. As this was the special section of the Nepali Army for cutting and managing trees by the roadside and Tamang people were considered expert at cutting trees, there was a tradition of hiring people from this community in that section of the Nepali Army. Some Tamang people of this community and their relatives from other parts of the country worked as '*pipa*'. Later, these '*pipas*' were converted into '*sipahi*' in the Army. Thus, the people of the community became aware of the alternative means of livelihood where they found the post of '*sipahi*' as their best option. The people started to change their ceiling targeting this post. The head teacher of the school of the area shared his experience regarding the changing educational ceiling, along with the prerequisite set for the post of '*sipahi*'. Earlier, people could enter lower level positions in government services such '*Pipa*' and '*Sipahi*' even if they were illiterate. Later, simple reading and writing became the prerequisite for entry. Now, only grade 8 completers can apply for the post. People of the area now think that the minimum level of education will be raised to SLC for that post. If it happened, these people will try their best to complete school level education.

Behind the Curtain: Ceiling Construction

Three basic concepts were found working in the background in the construction of different educational ceilings. First, all parents were found interested to move their children at least one step ahead from the point where they had rested. This is natural and applicable to every human being. If parents are illiterate, their primary educational aspiration will be to make their children at least literate. Maili's expectation of making her daughter literate from school education was a right example of this. In case of parents who were literate but had failed to get any employment other than agriculture, their educational aspiration was to secure employment for their children. This idea was more applicable to sons rather than daughters. Kanchha's expectation to make his son a Nepali Army soldier is an example. Sipahi Ba's father expected to make his son an officer in the Nepali Army where he could not go above the post of Sipahi.

Second, people experienced pains of different kinds, which they attributed to the lack of education. The lack of reading and writing skills was a great pain for those parents who were illiterate. Parents who had never been to school expressed that it was the reason why they sent their children to school. The experience of *Maili* was noteworthy. "People usually come to me with paper seeking my signature for some purpose or the other. I cannot read what is written there. I always fear about the problems I could encounter after signing the paper. But saying no is not practical. So, I put my signature on the paper just believing them blindly. I went to adult literacy classes to learn reading letters, but it did not work because of my old age. So, despite my poverty, I did my best to send my children to school. Now, I am happy that both my children can read and write. I believe that now they will not face the problems that I have been facing."

Like *Maili*, *Kanchha* found the life of his colleagues who had joined the Nepali Army very comfortable. He said, "My friends are now getting salaries and they will get pension even after retirement—a regular income even at old age without working." But he had a grievance that he left school at grade two and he could not join the Army as he was not a primary school graduate. Thus, he sent his son till grade 8 to fulfill this part of life which he had found important. Likewise, some youth who were simply literate had faced problems in foreign employment due to lack of command over the English language. As a result, they were doing their best to send their children to higher level of education as secondary level was not enough for them to achieve fluency in the English language. Likewise, *Shipahi Ba* had felt hardship working at a low post in the Army; thus, for him, schooling up to higher level became his educational ceiling. These were their life experience where they felt pain because of lack of education.

Third, people preferred 'one bird in hand' to 'many birds in bush'. The action of school dropout and then engage in work was the confirmed benefits where continuing school was although expected to have more benefits at future but it was not sure. People were found not to take risk of working hard at present with the hope of better life at future. The life experience and exposure to the outer world were two major contributing factors for construction of different educational ceilings among parents. Most of the people of the community had got little exposure to the outer world. In such cases, the experience they had gained from their life experience had played a role in the construction of ceiling and their ceiling was the lowest. On the other hand, some parents had got exposure to the outer world such as in the Nepali Army or those who had been to a Gulf country had seen the role of education in human life. Those parents were found giving high priority to their children's school education. A successful local businessman in the community, who had constant interactions with many successful people, shared his belief that if he had had an educational certificate up to SLC level, he would have gained some prestigious social or political position at national level. He shared his experience that, although he had good network and good source of income, due to lack of educational attainment, he had not been able to earn prestige. Consequently, he made his best efforts to make his son an architect or engineer. His daughter was now studying master's degree in hotel management.

Adjustment in Ceiling: Idealist to Realistic one

Generally, people were found setting a high and ideal level of educational ceiling in the beginning. Parents sent their children to school with the high hope of making them a 'great person'. The meaning of 'great person' for them was a rich person with power and prestige. Similar

expectation was expressed by the children as well. In addition to ensuring a bright future with more income and better employment, they expressed that education would help them to become great person and serve the nation. This perception was partly developed as a result of teachers' classroom lectures and their course books lessons about famous people of the country or the world.

While reaching to the higher grades both parent and children would face various discomfort. Parents needed to pay higher cost. Sending a child of 14 or 15 years was the loss of daily wage from them. In such conditions, they did cost-benefit analysis of sending children to school. When they found the experienced cost higher than the expected benefit of education, they did not bother when children themselves decided to dropping out of school. In some cases, the parents themselves had forced their children to quit school. *Sahanshila* was forced by her father to leave school after grade 8 as he found less benefit and more cost of her further schooling. Likewise, in higher grades of school education, children would find the classroom more painful than the expected gain of schooling. Due to their compulsory engagement in household chores and weak performance in lower grades, many children found it difficult to cope with classroom teaching and maintain satisfactory performance in the classroom. Their inability to cope with school had forced them to compromise to quit schooling before completing school education.

In such circumstances, both parents and children would take the example of failure story of educated person. The failure example of educated person *Raj*, *Rakesh* and *Resham* was famous in the community. *Raj* was unemployed; *Rakesh* had been to Gulf; and *Rakesh* had been back to traditional occupation of making and selling alcohol. Against these people, one land broker was popular in the society, who had been able to make good money despite he was merely literate. They were experienced that even after acquiring higher education, they had to bribe people to get good jobs. The belief that, whether they completed school education or not, going back to their traditional lifestyle or going abroad for labour work, would gradually come down and be fixed at a realistic level of educational ceiling, which they really perceived as the value in their lives. In other words, this was the realistic educational ceiling for which they were ready to pay.

Summary and Conclusion

The wide range of factors from household to school and child/parent-related factors identified by earlier research studies that forced children for school dropout were simply the enabling factors creating unfavourable circumstances to parents and children. All these factors and circumstances in combined along with individual's experience, exposure and personal/social context had generated a more subjective dynamics of school dropout - educational ceiling: a value of education for them in their life. At the research site, three types of ceiling prevailed among people. The people with the lowest level of ceiling perceived the school level education just to gain the literacy and numeracy skills. The people with intermediate level of ceiling perceived education as a means to acquiring new job, as well as a regular income. The highest level of ceiling perceived by the people considered education as a means to acquiring power, prestige and property in life. The personal life experience of people and their level of exposure to the outer world were the main contributing factors for constructing ideal level of educational ceiling, whereas people's personal context, children's school performance and subjective judgment on pain/cost versus gain were other components that adjusted their ceiling to a realistic one. This educational ceiling was the main driving force for parents' and children's decision to drop out of school. People were making efforts to continue schooling until they had reached their respective

educational ceiling and once they had achieved the ceiling, parents were found not much serious even when the child quit school. This research found that the construction of educational ceiling was the result of peoples' response to other actors and larger social context based on their individual experience, exposure and context. This implies that the issue of dropout is not limited to the school system. As and when these individual and society's contexts change, the educational ceiling of individual also changes and, thus, the dropout scenario changes accordingly.

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