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Comparative education and development: reflections from Nepal

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Relation between education and development has been recognized in Nepal since the beginning of planned development efforts and the modern schooling at mass level. Both were initiated during 1950s. Beginning of Development Studies in MPhil and PhD in Education in School of Education, Kathmandu University focused exploring such relationships in a systematic manner. This reflective paper shares some of the ideas and experiences on comparative education and development while working and developing the program Development Studies. It has been realized that comparative education can provide an important frame to explore such relationships. Accordingly, attempts were made to develop the program Development Studies that derive from understanding and exploring the pattern of the everyday life of the people, their knowledge base and the meaning they give to aspects like education and development. The purpose was also to consider how state interventions a modernization/globalization interplay with local values and meanings. The paper discusses challenges and strengths achieved while working with Development Studies. Finally, some key points are drawn to establish the international and comparative perspective of Nepali practices and experiences.

Keywords: development; education; comparative education; development studies; Nepal

The close relationship between education and development has long been emphasised in Nepal. Since the beginning of planned development efforts in the 1950s Nepali development policies and practices have constantly given a great deal of attention to this relationship. Attempts to modernise the post-1950 Nepali state were the reason behind the emphasis on education and its relationship with development. This relationship was seen at the people's level as well. With the beginning of modern mass education in Nepal in the 1950s, people have used education as a gateway to social status, employment and development. Accordingly, in the decades after 1950, like many developing countries around the world, Nepal experienced a rapid expansion of schooling.

Given such rapid expansion and people's interest in participating in schooling, about 94% of all primary age group children are now enrolled in schools. International donors' support has also been quite important in such expansion of schooling. From the very beginning of development endeavours in Nepal in the 1950s, donors have also had a very strong presence, greatly 'contributing' to the modernisation of Nepali education practices. Likewise, ideas like modernisation and globalisation have also played their role in shaping Nepali education. Thus, four forces have been active in

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the growth and development of education in Nepal – people, government, donors and modernisation/globalisation (Parajuli 2007).

Even though the relationship between education and development was well established in development practices, systematic efforts for understanding the nature of this relationship began much later. The School of Education (established in 1997) at Kathmandu University (established in 1992) initiated this practice by beginning MPhil (Master of Philosophy) and PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) programmes in education in Development Studies. This area of study was designed with the basic premise that as key social processes, education and development intricately interact with each other as well as with other social processes and that a dialectic process takes place during these interactions – influencing others and receiving influence from the others. Additionally, the focus of the course was on understanding and critically assessing the role of education as a social and developmental change agent in bringing positive and qualitative changes in peoples' everyday lives and their empowerment and freedom. Likewise, understanding the reproductive role of education in maintaining the traditional hierarchies of relations was also important.

This brief reflective note will be sharing some of the ideas and experiences revolving around the themes of comparative education and development while working with this area of study we describe as Development Studies. The focus of this sharing is to reflect on how we proceeded while designing and developing this area, particularly discussing some of the challenges we faced and some of the strengths we have had. While doing so, a case is made for seeing comparative education as dialectic discourses across cultures. Such discourses are particularly important for countries like Nepal which is currently in a complex and difficult process of restructuring the whole state system and where different socio-cultural groups are intensely researching their space and identity in the broader spectrum. Not only Nepal, countries/areas across the world where identity and role conflicts are taking place in one or another form can take on this idea of dialectic discourses across cultures. Here, comparative education can make important contributions by initiating and strengthening such discourses. One requirement however would be to develop more localised epistemologies for comparative education deriving from the everyday perspectives and world-views of the people.

Both the terms education and development carry a very broad meaning at the theoretical and conceptual level and at the level of people's everyday comprehension. The course of development studies in education at the School of Education, Kathmandu University, is built upon realising the complexity of the meaning of these terms and it promotes the exploration of these different and multiple meanings both theoretically and practically. As such, emphasis is given to exploring the relationships between education and development in a contextualised and localised manner. The idea is to demand that the whole developmental approach should be changed, arguing for learning and receiving from the local discourses as well - the idea being that education and development should not only be understood on the basis of externally developed theories and concepts, but also from local values and discourses. This is in line with the idea of dialectic discourses across cultures.

Here, it is important to have a brief discussion on the idea of the dialectic discourses we see while working with development studies. It is understanding and voicing the continuous interplay of manifold voices of the diverse and multiple agencies and their interaction with structural features that are themselves fluid and contextual and are created and recreated by the agencies. This implies that the relationships

are not only at the level of one to one but at the level of many to many, encompassing all related entities. This is also to imply that interactions between discourses are inherent with the obvious result of conflicts and contradictions between and among discourses. To sum up, dialectic discourses is to accept that multiple discourses are always in dialectical interaction and are generating new multiple discourses not necessarily confirming each other. The comparative perspective is important in understanding such interactions.

Likewise, a comparative perspective is inbuilt in the design of the Development Studies in education courses. Emphasis is given to understanding and explaining the existing patterns of education and development and their relationships with different other social processes and explaining why and how particular forms of relationships emerge in a particular time and context. This understanding is in line with the way comparative education has been described, 'inspecting two or more educational entities or events in order to discover how and why they are alike and different' (Thomas 1998, 1). The practice is thus to study the relationships across regional, political, societal, cultural and economic settings. It also should be noted here that the single setting studies are also given equal importance. In any case, the concern might be either understanding the phenomena – how and why the phenomena under the study are in given forms or not in given forms – or developing generalised theoretical propositions or testing some existing theories. In a rather restricted form comparative education is often associated with positivism and a cross-national focus in its approach (Noah 1984; Rust 2002). However, at the School of Education, Kathmandu University the approach is open – cross-national or local as well as single paradigm, multiple paradigms, and integral paradigm. Given the aim of developing dialectic discourses by exploring the relationships between education and development, adopting such an open approach is necessary.

On the basis of the discussion above, the concept of development studies in education can thus be described as an educational address to the problems of development. It aims to address these problems by contributing towards developing an understanding of the different meanings, theories and practices of development and their relationships with the processes of education, by promoting the idea of development from within, and by supporting the development that derives both from a local knowledge base and practices as well as modern technological advances. Realising the roles of education in raising awareness against hierarchies of relations by building knowledge on aspects of inequality and discrimination, hegemonies and counter-hegemonies are also its aims. Likewise, it also intends to contribute to identifying the areas of tensions between international agendas and ideologies and national and local agendas, practices and knowledge. These aims are based on premises that systemic inequalities and power imbalances are the major constraints towards achieving a just and caring society, social actors have agency, a network among social actors facilitates realising the constraining forces and contest against them, positive social changes are taking place and need to be highlighted and supported, and an education profile enables people to work as a part of the network.

At the beginning, however, it was not clear how this particular field of study was to be designed. We aimed to 'build bridges to forge collaboration with all those who are committed to creating a body of knowledge about education and its contribution to the future well-being of individuals, of communities, of societies worldwide' (see Little's contribution in this issue) 845–852. We wanted to make this concept a multi-disciplinary and integrated field of study which could provide a forum to all those

researchers, educationists, students, policy makers, practitioners who would like to think, interact and act on issues related to education and development. Our aim was largely in line with what Robert Arnove (see p. 827–830 of Arnove's contribution in this issue) has called the 'three principal dimensions' of comparative education: understanding and explaining the relationships between aspects of education and society; contributing to more informed or evidence-based education, social and development policy; and promoting international understanding, development and peace building.

Along with increasing interests, relationships and overlaps between comparative education and development studies at the international level (see Colclough p. 821–826 in this issue), we also aimed to develop the programme that could establish the social and developmental role of education. Likewise, it was thought necessary to work for bringing change, through research, teaching and publications, to the whole understanding of development and education in Nepal that was largely asocial, acontextual and ahistorical. In order to achieve these purposes, it was necessary to remain open with all paradigmatic approaches of knowledge building. One unique approach we have adopted is to promote the exploration of traditional religious and philosophical texts written in languages like Sanskrit and other local languages. Likewise, exploring the everyday practices of the people has also been emphasised. The aim is to contribute to developing localised epistemologies of knowledge building. It is believed that this would contribute to developing our understanding on comparative perspectives developed in traditional religious and philosophical texts as well as those developed and practised by people. This is what countries, nations and regions should work for – developing local perspectives in order to be able to respond to local problems and challenges in a more meaningful way. In fact, there exists such knowledge in one form or another. The need is to consolidate such knowledge and academia should take the lead in this direction.

Owing to the emphasis given to 'scientific' and 'modern' approaches to educational and developmental practices in Nepal, it was however not easy to remain open to all paradigmatic approaches to knowledge building and promoting the building of localised epistemologies. The donor driven practices in Nepal have largely contributed to make education and development external processes. Besides, the linkage between education and development was not very well discussed in Nepal, mainly because the pedagogical focus of education as a field of study. Education as a field of study was largely confined to raising the access to, participation in and quality of education. Compartmentalisation of fields of study in a traditional sense was also responsible for such a situation. Subjects like education and development were seen as two separate fields of study. Due to all these, the new initiation in the form of development studies was mainly understood as the project focusing on the development of education.

The challenges were thus mainly in the form of the need for breaking the hegemony of the received discourse, seeing education not only from a pedagogical perspective but also as a social and developmental process, and the de-compartmentalisation of fields of study. Challenges were there from the comparative and international development perspective as well – to make our work or product competitive and as per the quality at the international level. It was necessary for us to remain open, with the knowledge achieved elsewhere in the world in the field of education and development, so that we could prepare ourselves as per the demand of the globalised time and context. One reality worth noting here is that few independent research works have been carried out by Nepali scholars with international comparative

perspectives. This is mainly due to the little opportunity and support available to Nepali scholars and also due to the lack of access to information on the sources of support. This has resulted in a sort of tradition among Nepali scholars, with few exceptions, for not prioritising the introduction of international perspectives in their works as well as not seeking international publications of their works.

Working amidst such challenges, the programme of Development Studies has established itself as a popular field of study among students. Student response to this programme has been very positive. Each year we take a new batch of about 25 students (about 20 for the MPhil course and 5 for the PhD course). Through their research work they have contributed in generating analytical and critical information on different aspects of education, development and social relationships across multiple settings or in a single setting. Some of the research work has also been conducted on international topics.

Despite such achievements on one front, it is difficult for us to say how the programme has succeeded in achieving its objective in bringing changes in development thinking in Nepal and in seeing education as the centre stage of development and social practices and relationships. This is because a more institutionalised system of linkage between public policy and planning and academic and research exercises has yet to be developed in Nepal. We have often found that Nepali development and education practices, both in government and non-government sectors, are not research or evidence based. Lack of enough research funds for more comprehensive work and lack of opportunities to disseminate and participate in international and national academic and developmental activities are some of the other constraints for a more effective contribution. However, considering its growth profile in the past few years it could be claimed that development studies in education will remain and will develop to be a major and influential study subject in the years to come.

In order to see this happen in a more meaningful way here are some key points that we need to promote. These key points can be seen as a summing up of the discussion above and as an effort to bring them into the international frame with the purpose of sharing Nepali experiences with others. They are as follows:

- Promoting dialectic discourses across cultures – exploring and understanding multiple discourses of the people and other actors greatly contributes to minimise local and regional tensions and conflicts facilitating peace building and sustainability of development.
- Continuing efforts with building localised epistemologies – when we try to see and analyse local developmental or educational concerns in the frame of local peoples' worldviews as expressed in their everyday practices, we could have more meaningful understandings of processes and phenomena.
- Building international perspectives – some of the local phenomena and processes could have direct or indirect relationships with global processes, so seeing things with the global perspective is also essential. Promoting dialogue with international academia and practitioners is thus important.
- Integrating education and development – achieving the broader goal of people's empowerment and freedom and just and caring societies is facilitated when we see education and development as part of the same broader process and strengthen the relationships between the two.
- Working for linkage between research and policy – in the light of the weak linkage between research and policy, a strong advocacy for such a relationship on a

more functional level is essential. Two strategies are important here. The first strategy is speaking the language that is understandable to policy makers and to the general public. This will include prioritising those issues that are of more direct concern to policy makers and to public. The second strategy is to educate the policy makers and the public so that they understand the language of research and academia.

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