



# Educational Development in Nepal: Issues and Initiatives

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**Abstract:** This paper answers two research questions related to Nepal's educational issues and initiatives: (1) What are the major educational issues of Nepal? (2) What initiatives have been taken to resolve educational issues in Nepal? In responding to the questions, the article presents major educational issues and initiatives taken to resolve those issues. Finally, a discussion is carried out by evaluating the issues presented.

**Keywords:** Nepal; education; issues; initiatives

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nepal's background is useful to explain its state of education. With the current demography exceeding 30 million people, the Central Himalayan Republic is a multiethnic and multilingual nation. Nepal's population is comprised of 125 ethnic groups who speak 123 languages (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2014; Joshi<sup>a</sup>, 2022; Joshi<sup>b</sup>, 2022; Joshi & James, 2022). High level of poverty (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2009) coupled with widespread discrimination against Dalits, women, and ethnic minorities have influenced the country's educational outcomes. Nonetheless, the country's more recent educational problems are largely rooted in political instability. For instance, only recently did the country relieved from a decade long armed conflict launched by Maoists, who challenged the country's multiparty democracy restored in 1989, in favor of a communist dictatorship (Joshi et al., 2022). The Maoists targeted and killed thousands of ordinary Nepalis who refused to embrace the Maoist ideology. The conflict displaced thousands of poor and innocent civilians, who fled to more secure cities and towns or to neighboring India (Media Foundation, 2011). During the conflict, the Maoists ordered schools to be closed; tortured and killed school teachers; abducted young children and drafted them in their army; barred children to attend school. Eventually, they forced millions of children out of school until a peace accord was signed between them and Nepal government in 2005. Yet, it is important to remember that Nepal's educational problems go beyond Maoist conflict. In fact, they began as the country started modernization in the early 1950s after the ouster of Rana autocracy that ruled Nepal since 1846 (Savada, 1991) and continue today.

## 2. PURPOSE AND METHOD

The primary purpose of this paper is to present major educational issues and initiatives to address the issues. The paper answers two research questions and discusses the issues.

- What are the major educational issues?
- What initiatives have been taken to resolve current educational issues?

## 3. FINDINGS

This section descriptively responds to the two research questions related to Nepal's educational issues and initiatives. Available literature is used to support the arguments, which are presented under the two broad subheadings.

### 3.1. Educational Issues

In Nepal, educational issues are endemic at both policy and grassroots levels. Some of the consequential issues are elucidated under the subheadings below.

### 3.2. Slow Progress in Literacy

A large segment of Nepal's population is still illiterate: 5% among 15–24 years old youths in 2019; 32.1% among 15 years and older people in 2018; 76.4% among 60 years and older citizens in 2018 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UIS [UNESCO, UIS], 2022). This is a very poor literacy situation as literacy campaign in Nepal started seven decades ago, right after the end of Rana oligarchy (Savada, 1991), aiming to literate all citizens sooner than later.

### 3.3. School-Related Issues

Several school related issues exist in Nepal that discourage school access and retention. The problems include long distance travel between home and school; teachers' lack of training and professionalism; rampant physical punishment in school; negative portrayal of and discrimination against disadvantaged students (the poor, so-called lower castes, ethnic minorities, and girls) in many forms; lack of essential resource and facility at school; untrained and unprofessional school administration; lack of early childhood education in many schools. (Joshi et al., 2000; Joshi et al., 2022; Neupane, 2017; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], n.d.).

### 3.4. Caste, Ethnicity, Gender-Based Inequalities

Nepal's education is characterized by persistent inequalities in school enrollment. The inequality is reflected in the representation of girls, ethnic minority children from various linguistic and cultural groups, Dalits, and disabled: 48%, 38%, 18%, and 1% respectively until a decade ago (Department of Education [DOE], 2008). Recently Neupane (2017) attested to the poor school attainment among marginalized groups. The school enrollment of marginalized children was close to the representation of teachers from marginalized groups, such as, female (30.8%), ethnic minority (17.8%), and Dalit (2.5%) a little earlier (Department of Education [DOE], 2004). Scholars have indicated a huge disparity between gender and ethnicity-based teacher representation more recently (Joshi et al., 2022; Joshi & James, 2022). The current disparities are unlikely to change without major educational policy shift.

### 3.5. High Dropout; Low Attendance

Children's right to quality education has not been guaranteed despite constitutional provisions for free and compulsory education in Nepal (Nepal Law Commission, 2018). Thus, low school attendance and high school dropout among the poor and the marginalized children are not uncommon. Neupane (2017) alluded to the high school dropout situation among ethnic minority and Dalit students. Pokharel (2022) argued that "[poverty], economic hardship, socio-economic status and geographical barriers could be the reasons behind the remarkably high dropouts among Dalits and marginalized students" ("Nepal's dropout rates"). The overall school attendance rate (net adjusted rate) for 1 year before the lower basic to secondary schools in Nepal are approximately 83% and 49% (UNICEF, 2019).

### 3.6. Lack of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is critical for students' educational success and many scholars have attested that parental involvement has positive association with children's academic success (Hara & Burke, 1998; Hill & Craft, 2003; Topor et al., 2010). Joshi et al. (2015) state that parents are one component of school stakeholders who can contribute to helping their children in the socializing process. In Nepal parental involvement in school is low due to both parental poverty and illiteracy. Evidence show that a large segment of the country's population is poor (Ealey, 2019), leading to poor contribution of parents in the educational process because parents are unprepared to support their children's education and deal with schools. Thus, it is not surprising that there is a low involvement of parents in rural areas in the matter of curriculum, teaching, and learning (Shah, 2019).

### 3.7. Effect of Top-Down Policy

Nepal's education policy is centrally controlled; therefore, dominant ideology and interests are widespread in educational policy. For example, despite the constitutional provision, instruction in local languages is scarce, contributing to the marginalization of linguistic minority children from schools (Joshi<sup>a</sup>, 2022; Joshi<sup>b</sup>, 2022).

### 3.8. Resource Deficit

Neupane (2019) argues that Nepal's public education—both school education and university education—are in disadvantage state due to the lack of resources, especially the lack of advanced educational technology. The 21<sup>st</sup> century skills demand that students learn transferable skills and knowledge that can be used for global competitiveness. Due to the lack of advanced communication and technology, Nepali schools are unprepared to prepare students to learn essential skills and knowledge to compete beyond their national boarder.

### 3.9. Lack of Monitoring

In Nepal, there is a need to make educational stakeholders accountable for their job. The current lack of strategic monitoring, supervision, and evaluation systems related to school-based programs and practices indicate the need for quality measurement and control of educational development in the country. Reports indicate “inadequate supervision, monitoring, and academic support” (National Institute for Research and Training [NIRT], 2016, p. vi) to enhance teaching and learning in Nepal.

### 3.10. Poor Educational Financing

Though it is critically important to enhance educational development in the country, the financing of education is poor in Nepal (Khaniya, 2007). In 2010, the government's educational budget decreased from 17.1% to 12.04% and continued in the same trend (Sharma et al., 2015). Sharma et al. (2015) also noted problems of effectiveness and productivity in government's educational funding. Another issue with educational financing in Nepal is that it is largely donor driven; hence donor interests are prevalent in the policy and practice.

### 3.11. Educational Initiatives

Nepal put into practice various policies to improve the educational development over the last seven decades, yet no evidence suggests the success of educational interventions in transforming the country's education sector.

### 3.12. Major Reforms

To achieve universal primary education, Nepal implemented Primary Education Project (PEP) as a pilot program in 1983 with the support of the World Bank. After endorsing the Jomtien Declaration on *Education for All* (EFA), Nepal developed Basic and Primary Education Prospective Plan (PEPP) and completed the Basic and Primary Education Projects (BPEP): BPEP I (1994–1998) and BPEP II (1999–2004). Khaniya (2007) claims that the later projects were more successful than the previous ones in achieving educational outcomes.

In 2000, Nepal committed to provide universal primary education by implementing EFA before 2015. It also committed to provide primary education in local languages (UNDP, 2005; UNESCO, 2015). The EFA was expected to complete in two phases—2004 to 2009 and 2010 to 2015—with the pooled and joint financing of international agencies including the WB and UNICEF among others. However, those commitments were never fully translated into reality as the country continued its past habits in extending deadlines. For instance, despite some improvement, there remained a lot of issues with educational equity: Poor children were deprived of primary education; regional disparities existed in terms of distribution of schools and teachers; not all children completed primary school; children did not acquire basic knowledge and skills (UNESCO, 2015).

To ensure that all Nepalis are literate, Nepal implemented other literacy campaigns as well. For instance, the Non-Formal Education Centre (2009) adopted *National Literacy Campaign Programme Directives 2009*, a guideline to enhance literacy programs targeted to literate citizens aged between 15 and 50 who were left out of school. The program aimed at accomplishing the target within two years of implementation before 2011. Current literacy results indicate that the achievement was far below the expectation, i.e., only 67.91% literacy achievement among adults of the intended category (UNESCO UIS, 2022).

For the development of middle and secondary school sector, Nepal started Science Education Development Project (SEDP) in 1981. The program focused on improving the quality of teaching through teacher training, teaching material development and supply, school infrastructure development in science, mathematics, and English subjects (SEP, 2002). The program continued with

the creation of Secondary Education Development Project (SEDP) in 1994. The SEDP highlighted “equity, quality, efficiency, and relevance” through educational reform in curriculum, examination, and teacher education; school infrastructure development; enhancement of school management; development of school monitoring and supervision mechanism; community participation (SEP, 2007). The latter program targeted to increase the enrollment of girls and the disadvantaged at both lower and secondary levels, to fully train 80% secondary school teachers and to bring the class size from 20 to 45 students. However, there is scarcity of evidence to suggest that any of the targets were met.

### 3.13. Constitutional Reforms

Nepal’s educational reforms have been guided by constitutions and accompanying legal documents. Nepal promulgated the 1990 constitution, making education free up-to secondary school (*The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990*). The 1990 constitution highlighted equality, human rights, freedom of speech, democracy. For the first time in the country’s history, the new constitution allowed education in mother tongue up to the primary level, opening door for multilingual schooling. Then, to address the growing discontent among people including the Maoist rebellion, the country promulgated a new constitution in 2015, continuing the provision for free and compulsory education and making provision for education in mother-tongue; the constitution authorized the local governments to control and manage school education (Nepal Law Commission, 2018). The country has also updated various educational acts to support educational provisions made in the constitutions.

### 3.14. School Sector Reforms

Beside other efforts, Nepal has frequently updated the school sector reform plans and strategies for intervention, highlighting the issues, areas, and priorities of school sector to ensure access, equity, efficiency, governance and management of school sector, and quality in education (MoE, 2016; World Bank, 2017). The reforms have stipulated the roles of governing and managing bodies and detailed the policies and strategies (see MoE, 2016; World Bank, 2017). However, most school sector programs in Nepal are of transitory in nature due to its changing political landscape and external factors like donor interests.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Given the absence of mandatory universal primary education and widespread illiteracy, especially among the marginalized citizens, the current state of Nepal’s education demonstrates a host of problems. Because education is an indicator of development (Khania, 2007), Nepal needs to pay attention to the ways of minimizing caste, ethnicity, and gender-based disparities in education (Joshi et al., 2022; Joshi & James, 2022). As Khaniya (2007) remarks there is no developed country with poor education or vice versa. One way to enhance literacy and universal primary education in Nepal is to make connection between learning and students’ real-life problems. In this case, Nepal needs to depart from old literacy models that limit learning to recognize alphabets, numbers, words, and copying them in writing. Similarly, the country needs to prepare schools and teachers to deal with students’ interests and real-life needs because student motivation is central to learning. As traditional ways of teaching cannot create students’ interest in learning (Joshi et al., 2000; Joshi et al., 2010), curriculum must emphasize innovative and learner-centered pedagogies. Unless literacy programs emphasize learners’ day-to-day issues and critical literacy, unless lessons can attract attention of children, it may be impossible to increase school attendance because learners may not see meanings of learning in their real-life.

The issues of low school attendance and school dropout can also be solved by addressing the issues of school costs in case of the poor, reducing the physical proximity between schools and home, making teaching activities and support systems student friendly. Similarly, schools need to update their resources and implement strategies to address linguistic, ethnic, caste, and gender-based inequalities. In case of addressing the linguistic inequality, they can emphasize education in minority languages, to address the issues of caste, ethnicity, and gender, they can hire and prepare teachers from minority backgrounds (Joshi<sup>a</sup>, 2022; Joshi et al., 2022; Joshi & James, 2022). If schools pay attention to what children want rather than what policymakers, educators, and politicians determine what children want (see Koirala, 2010), the issues related to low school attendance and drop out could be addressed more effectively.



To deal with the issue of top-down policy and practice, Nepal needs to change in governing practices. Until now the country is engaged in ideological confrontations; however, political leadership must think about the ways they can govern to the public better. For instance, local governments must encourage parents to engage with schools. Parents' school involvement not only makes schools lively spaces, but it also encourages schools and teachers to work in the best interest of parents. As most parents in Nepal are poor and illiterate, local governments should organize parental awareness programs and compensate them. The more parents show interest in school activities and engage in them, the more opportunity they get to engage with each other and social institutions collectively and democratically. Hence, they can start to think what is in theirs and their community's best interest rather than what has been offered to them. The benefit of bottom policy is also that it makes schools and local governments accountable to schools' success and failure. Such will facilitation monitoring and evaluation strategies to assess teaching and learning effectively (Carney & Bista, 2009). Because schools and local governments require expertise to carryout monitoring and evaluation activities, they can pressure bureaucracy to act as a more responsible stakeholders to improve education.

To deal with resource deficit, there should be strong and responsible financial planning. Since, Nepal government's financing of education is problematic due to the lack of coherent strategies (Khaniya, 2007), it should learn from the international stakeholders and borrow best practices from other countries if possible. Also, since there is heavy support for lower primary education development and almost no support at the upper secondary levels, Nepal government must pay attention to all levels to maintain the balance to avoid unforeseen consequences. Unfortunately, most problems concerning the imbalance educational financing has happened due to donor pressures, which may not work best in the interest of schools and communities. This does not mean that all externally initiated programs are wrong. Carney and Bista (2009) point out to the school transfer program(from government to community)beneficial for Nepal to increase community participation and facilitate the monitoring of schools.

Another important thing concerning financing of education is to measure it in terms of its contribution to productivity. Indeed, the focus of education should be on getting the maximum return. If we evaluate Nepal's educational with the questions used by Reimers (1996), who assessed the education system of the countries of Latin America, we may not understand whether education has been responsible for "increasing the productivity of the labor force," [...] "reducing absolute poverty and [improving] equity," and "consolidating democratic institutions" (p. 33). Reimers (1996) found that ineffective schooling was responsible for decreasing gross national productivity ultimately posing threats to democracy.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the end, Nepal's education has suffered from a host of issues. Despite several initiatives to reform education, the country's literacy situation is meager, indicating that the country needs clear policy and practice strategies, resources, finances, and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders. However, existing initiatives seem mundane, therefore, need diversification, specifically, new initiatives must focus on ways to make actors and agencies accountable to their performance. Only then we can hope that the existing educational issues can be addressed to meet the needs of people.

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