Exploring the influence of the curriculum on student learning in culturally and ethnically diverse classroom contexts: Praxis, paradoxes and perspectives of stakeholders

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions and lived experiences of Nepalese educators and stakeholders in relation to the school curriculum and its influence upon student learning in a culturally and ethnically diverse classroom context. The study adopted a qualitative research design using face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to gather the perceptions of students, teachers, school principals and curriculum experts from three different schools representing distinct and diverse Nepalese settings. The findings identified that there are six main factors that affect curriculum delivery in Nepal: a centralised education system; social, economic and cultural diversity; political instability; curriculum content; the involvement of curriculum development stakeholders; and teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge and related attributes. These six factors all contribute to a significant influence on student learning.

Keywords

Curriculum; student learning; perspectives; cultural diversity; Nepal

Introduction

There is a growing research interest in investigating the influence of the curriculum on student learning in culturally diverse and developing countries (Damon, Glewwe, Wisniewski, & Sun, 2018) Evans & Popova, 2016; Ganimian & Murnane, 2016). The curriculum is a central feature of education as it both governs and affects other key elements relating to the focus of the educational enterprise. These include system-wide aims or statements of intent, teaching and learning strategies, assessment methods, and broader school and system evaluation processes. These elements are inter-related: when one component is altered it affects change in other elements. Uniformity in the enactment of the curriculum is an unrealistic expectation because the consistency of alignment of the planned curriculum, the taught curriculum and the experienced curriculum depends on the value judgements of teachers and administrators and other factors including the local context and institutional constraints.

This article explores these variables as the planned curriculum makes its journey to Nepalese classrooms.

Where there are national curricula, these reflect a country's aspirations in respect to its educational aims, purposes and values. These, in turn, inform the constitution of relevant policies and provide principles and guidelines for their implementation, including the deployment of national curricula (Schmidt & McKnight, 1995). In Nepal, the national curriculum is intended to provide the over-arching design for education in schools and sets out what is to be learned through formal education. However, as in all jurisdictions globally, there is a complex relationship between the intended, the implemented, and the enacted or attained curriculum (Kurz, Elliot, Wehby & Smithson; 2010; Prideaux, 2003; Valverde, 2003). Curriculum documents contain divergent meanings, contradictions and structured omissions so that different effects are produced on different actors at different points in the curriculum journey. Trowler (2003) drew attention to a 'muddling through' process as policy works its way via contestation and compromise through each level of interpretation and implementation. Policy is also characterised by an attenuated transmission within schools as it is implemented by leadership teams and teachers. Teachers' beliefs, value judgements, choices of teaching strategies, available resources, and their experience and qualifications also influence a policy's or curriculum's implementation (Coburn, 2006; Schmidt & McKnight, 1995; Valverde, 2004). These factors are evident in Nepal as they are elsewhere.

There are a variety of additional factors that can also pose serious challenges in effectively enacting the curriculum. These include budgetary constraints, resources, facilities, students, local context, societal and community expectations, and the pressures of globalising trends and influences (Prideaux, 2007). The purpose of this article is to explore some of the effects of these various factors in the context of recent educational reforms in Nepal, particularly the political restructuring of Nepal into seven different federal states.

The Nepalese context

Nepal has long had a centralised mechanism that defines the curriculum and publishes the textbooks to be used in its schools, although there are recent policy indications that signal an emerging shift towards more autonomy for individual regions in relation to educational policy (Ministry of Education, 2016). However, for more than a decade, the same school curriculum and textbooks have been used with very few revisions during this time. Research in relation to Nepalese education has primarily focused on issues such as discrimination and equity (Acharya, 2007; Asian Development Bank, 2010; Mathema, 2007), poverty (UNESCO, 2011) and resources (Subedi, 2003). However, little research has been undertaken regarding the curriculum and its links with academic achievement, or about its applicability to the Nepalese context in light of education's national aims and its regional characteristics.

Nepal has established national aims for education that inform targeted educational standards at all levels. However, there has always been a mismatch between the goals and the practical outcomes. According to the Ministry of Education and Sports (2004), the national goals for education in Nepal place an emphasis on the development of learners in relation to society. Education is expected to release the capabilities inherent in every individual and to provide an environment in which to promote personal and social development. A child is supposed to maintain his/her personal identity, should be able to live well with others and must be aware of the democratic norms and values as an emerging responsible citizen (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation [Norad], 2009).

A central aim of Nepalese education is to provide a curriculum that stimulates human creativity and promotes international principles of peace, cooperation and understanding of fundamental human rights. These educational goals are summarised as follows by the Ministry of Education and Sports in 2004:

- To nurture and develop the personalities and innate abilities of each individual;

- To instil respect for human values and the will to safeguard national and social benefits;
- To enhance social unity;
- To help the individual develop his/her identity in both national and international context and lead a socially harmonious life in the modern world;
- To aid the modernisation of the nation by creating able human resources for its development;
- To teach the thoughtful protection and wise use of Nepal's natural resources;
- To help disadvantaged citizens to enter the mainstream of national life (UNESCO, 2006, p. 1).

In line with the national goals of education, the general aims of secondary education are to "produce healthy citizens who are: familiar with the national tradition, culture, social environment, democratic values; able to use language effectively in daily life; aware of scientific issues; creative, co-operative, industrious; able to contribute to economic development" (Pandey, 2003, p. 225). These are principled, big picture, but not notably distinctive ambitions. They do not differ in substance from the kinds of aspirations articulated by a range of developed and developing nations around the world. The interesting question is the extent to which there is a gap between the rhetoric and Nepalese realities.

Despite the identified aims of education, Nepalese education is traditionally based on memorisation and rote learning, practices adopted from nineteenth century Britain and India (Simkhada & Teijlingen, 2010). Teaching-learning activities and classroom practices are mostly teacher-centred and focus on the transmission of knowledge (UNESCO, 2008). Teaching is primarily based on the lecture method. This traditional teaching approach is often criticised for making students passive. It does not focus on a deeper understanding of the subject matter and is exam-oriented (Nepal & Panuwatwanich, 2011).

The success rate of curriculum attainment, reflected by the School Leaving Examination (now known as Secondary Education Exam [SEE]) of Nepal in 2014, was 28.19 percent (Ministry of Education, 2015). This clearly indicates gaps between the intended, implemented and attained curriculum. Partly to obscure the weakness of the SLC (School Leaving Certificate) results, the government introduced a grading system with a Grade Point Average (GPA) mechanism without any changes in the assessment system: although students are no longer marked as 'Failed', the quality of education has declined as the number of high achievers further diminishes. There is no sense of competition among students— and the majority achieved lower grades (Rauniyar, 2017). For example, among 462,136 students who took the final examination at secondary level in 2017, 445,000 students achieved a grade of E (Insufficient, below 0.8 GPA) across 52 subjects (MyRepublica, 2017).

It is argued that when local context and cultural aspects are not given enough space in the school curriculum, it can adversely affect self-esteem, confidence and learner ownership, thus inviting numerous learning challenges. Breidlid (2013) argues that "indigenous knowledges have important assets that need to be seriously considered in a world that is completely dominated by Western epistemology and knowledge production" (p. 3). Nepal's curriculum, however, is intended to address the country's diversity. In total, 125 caste/ethnic groups were reported in the most recent census and 123 different languages are spoken as a mother tongue in the country, while Nepali remains the official language of education. In reality, there is little evidence that Nepal's diversity is represented in education policy, and the taught national curriculum, textbooks and content and the medium of instruction in public schools are all based on the Nepali language with no accommodation of linguistic diversity.

The research from which this article was drawn was guided by a conceptual framework based on the three dimensions of curriculum: the planned curriculum, the delivered curriculum and the attained curriculum (Kurz et al., 2010; Prideaux, 2003; Valverde, 2003).
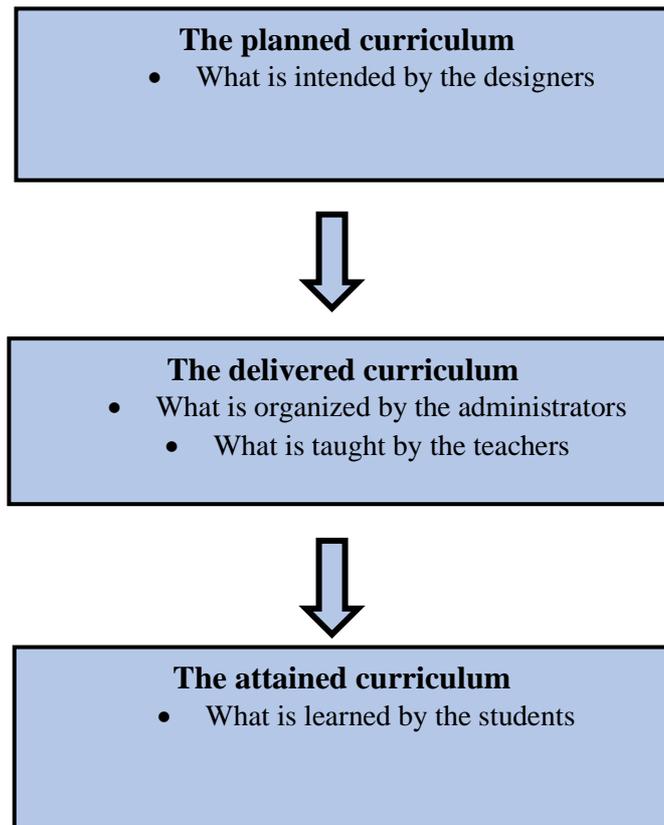
Figure 1.   **The curriculum model**

Research methodology

The study explored perceptions of the curriculum's impact on learning in public secondary schools in Nepal (Gurung, 2018). Qualitative data was obtained from major curriculum stakeholders through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions that incorporated their perceptions and lived experiences in connection with curriculum development and implementation. For the purpose of the study, open-ended questions were devised. One school was chosen from each of the following three districts of Nepal—Parbat, Myagdi and Chitwan. The selection of schools was purposively based on the dominance of the ethnic/indigenous community children in those schools, in order to examine the cultural issues in relation to curriculum implementation. The students belonged to *Tharu* (known for their indigenous knowledge on art and painting), *Magar* (one of the dominant ethnic groups) and *Pariyar* (one of the most underprivileged caste groups of Nepal treated as untouchables by so-called higher caste people; *Pariyars* are well-known for the indigenous music that is popular across the nation) communities of the Chitwan, Myagdi and Parbat districts. Separate focus group interviews were conducted for teachers and students in each school. All teachers working in the secondary level were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. However, students were chosen from a draw among those who showed interest to participate in the study. Subsequently, the school principals and curriculum experts from the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), Kathmandu were interviewed. Participants subsequently checked the transcripts as a true record of their comments.

Table 1.   *Research Instruments and Participants*

Instrument	District	Research participants	No. of participants
Interview	Kathmandu	Curriculum experts	2
Interview	Parbat, Myagdi, Chitwan	School Principals	3
Focus group discussions	Parbat, Myagdi, Chitwan	Teachers	27 (9 in each group)
Focus group discussions	Parbat, Myagdi, Chitwan	Students	27 (9 in each group)

Interview data were thematically analysed through coding and categorising into emergent themes (Table 2) (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Cross case-analysis and data triangulation were adopted to enhance credibility. In Table 2, the following acronyms have been used in the square brackets to illustrate the indicative findings: type of interview (FGD=focus group discussion, I=interview), participant (SP=School Principal, CE=Curriculum Expert, S=Students and T=Teachers) and location (C=Chitwan, P=Parbat and M=Myagdi).

Informed consent was obtained in written form from all participants (translated into Nepali). Participation in the study was voluntary and individuals were able to withdraw at any time. All endeavours were undertaken to ensure the participants' confidentiality with the use of acronyms.

Findings

The qualitative data obtained through interviews and focus group discussion with the major curriculum stakeholders were analysed according to emergent themes (see Table 2 for illustration).

Table 2.   *Summary of Findings Based on Emerged Themes*

Themes	Some indicative responses of the participants
Centralised education system (medium of instruction, textbooks, assessment mechanism, curriculum)	When we teach about festivals, in almost every textbook irrespective of primary, lower secondary or secondary level, they have included *Dashain* and *Tihar* as the main festivals (followed by the dominant *Brahmin* community). At least they could have given us the liberty of choosing the local festivals so that we could adjust the local context. (FGDTC) We have failed to achieve the learning outcomes of the curriculum. We have copied the international practices which don't always suit to our circumstances and does not yield as per the need of our soil. (ISPP) Contents of the curriculum are chosen looking at the situation of students from urban areas. While choosing the contents of the curriculum students from all the regions must be taken into consideration. (FGDTP) There is a provision to provide primary education in their (students') local language, but it is not implemented at all. Students are compelled to learn in Nepali medium. (FGDTP)
Social, economic, cultural diversity (poverty, discriminatory practices such as gender and underprivileged caste groups)	There are various family reasons that affect our performance. Most important of all is economic condition. Poverty is the main factor that influences our academic performance. There are other reasons as well. For example, our society thinks girls do not need higher education. Hence, girls are compelled to leave school even if they want to continue their education. Early marriage is the next factor that has some impacts on learning outcomes and school retention. (FGDSC)

	Nepal has two types of education mechanism: private schools and public schools. Education is privatised these days and is expensive to afford for the poor ones. The rich ones opt for private schools; children from poor families and marginalised communities come to public schools. Government has not provided enough support to the children from such families. The subsidies provided to students is nominal, it must be increased. Further, children from *Dalit* [downtrodden community] and ethnic communities get married at an early age. Boys feel they can join the army or go abroad for employment. Some students leave school due to financial reasons, other leave due to peer pressure. (FGDTP)
	Poverty is cross-cutting and multiple. If a child is poor, he/she is weakened by malnutrition. Due to malnutrition he/she becomes psychologically and physiologically feeble. He/she has no family environment of learning, has no parental support. That ultimately affects formal education. Lack of formal education affects his/her career. It's like a vicious circle. (ICE2)
	One of the reasons of poor performance of students is their economic condition of the family. For example, they get admitted to school with the intention of getting scholarship. Once they receive the financial support, they discontinue studying. Since their first priority is food, they begin to seek employment opportunities before they complete their education. Education is secondary whereas life is primary. (ISPM)
Political instability (teachers' involvement in politics, political interference in school management committee and selection and recruitment of teachers, frequent strike and other political movements)	Local institutions are run by the bureaucrats. It would be better if political and professional organisations could lead it. Our local institutions have not reached to the crux. The money is spent in trivial things rather than in holistic area. It's better if we spend money from a single basket. Government education is taken as free education. Money should be charged to those who can afford and the government should give a subsidy to those who cannot. It will be more systematic after that. (ICE1)
	The political change has also affected the curriculum, more importantly political instability has badly hurt our education system. (FGDTM)
	Frequent strikes and political movement, involvement of teachers and use of students in political motives are the major hurdles that have impacted on delivering the curriculum. Teachers cannot complete courses on time due to frequent strikes. Consequently, we have not been able to achieve the set goals of secondary education. (ISPP)
	Politics in almost every sector has crippled our education. It is not limited to the involvement of teachers and students in politics, rather there is a political influence even in the formation of school management committee and teacher selection and recruitment process that directly affects the delivery of the curriculum. How can we ensure quality education in such a situation? (ISPC)
Curriculum contents and involvement of major stakeholders in curriculum development	For example, in the textbook of science in primary level there is a question 'Where does a fish live?' and the answer is given: 'Fish lives in an aquarium.' Our children understand that fish lives in water (in a pond or in a stream or in a river), they don't understand what an aquarium is. This is just an example. This proves that curriculum and contents are decided in a room without understanding the practical realities of life. This could be the reason people demand of local curriculum these days. Curriculum is designed in a room and executed, they (curriculum experts) don't understand the ground realities. So it does not match practically with the students' standard. (FGDTC)
	When our textbooks include about our own social activities and culture, we find it interesting to study… curriculum of school should be changed as per the demand of time … when textbooks and curriculum are designed, they must be suitable to our standards and age appropriate. Language chosen in the textbooks is not appropriate to our standard; we find it difficult. It should be linked to our daily-life situation. (FGDSC)
Teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge and their attributes	We have not been able to present contents of curriculum as mentioned in the school curriculum. What we normally do is to read out what is given in the textbook. Students listen to what we say. Hence, we have failed to get the intended outcome … It is because

	we lack adequate infrastructures to promote 'learning by doing' … I agree, in some cases, teachers do not act responsibly. They have been using the same teaching methodologies that were in use more than a decade ago. New technologies have not been adopted at all. (FGDTM)
	When we tell them (teachers) that we could not understand the topic, they repeat the topic, but they don't change their method of teaching. We cannot say that we dislike their teaching methods … if they give us chance, we can present on any topic, learning from friends is easy and we can compare ourselves and learn better. (FGDSM)
	Teaching methods are properly described in the curriculum; however, teachers do not follow the methods prescribed, they use their own conventional ways of disseminating knowledge and skills. Additional budget has been allocated so that schools will be able to buy teacher's guidelines and other necessary reference materials. Nevertheless, that budget is not utilised properly. Teachers have been teaching traditionally, exactly the same way they were taught by their teachers. Improvement is hindered because of this. (ICE1)
Conventional assessment system	Our system gives more priority to written examination and hierarchical classification. Only figures cannot determine 'learnt' and 'not learnt', rather this should be associated with real learning. For that, we have not been able to promote new assessment system in spite of having a mechanism for that. (ICE2)
	Standardised tests like District Level Examinations (DLE) and School Leaving Certificate Examination (SLC) are totally based on written exams. Moreover, evaluation of a school is merely based on the SLC result and the percentage the students secure. Since the examination system itself isn't transparent, we can't be confident in this regard either. In my opinion, evaluation is not appropriate here. It's the weakest aspect of Nepalese education system. (FGDTM)

Discussion

The analysis of the qualitative data identified various factors that participants identified as impacting upon curriculum development and implementation in Nepal, which ultimately affects student learning.

Firstly, an overly centralised approach was perceived as a problem. Decentralisation in education has emerged globally due to a growing appreciation of the benefits of respecting diversity and so cultivating autonomy. The participants of this research articulated a feeling of being dictated to by distinctively urban thinking and priorities, and also identified a lack of power to make their own more locally and culturally appropriate curriculum choices. Decentralisation in education can empower local stakeholders of education assigning them rights and responsibilities which make them accountable to the educational system. As a consequence, the quality of education can improve through the involvement of students, teachers, school principals and parents. Decentralisation in education has also been adopted as a strategy to strengthen indigenous knowledge, skills and cultures promoting local communities and their local economy. Problems related to the unsatisfactory performance of the students, reduced collaboration between learners and teachers, and failures in responding to learners' needs have all been factors leading to decentralisation in education as centralised education systems have found it hard to cater for the needs of learners of diverse cultures and communities.

Linked to the problem of centralisation is the use of a single language—Nepali—as the medium of instruction other than English as a foreign language that is practised in public schools in Nepal. The medium of instruction is decided by the central authorities and the textbooks and other resources use Nepali as a main medium, even though there are more than 123 languages spoken throughout Nepal (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2011). This monolingual method of instruction has become one of the prominent problems influencing the low quality of community schools (Parajuli & Das, 2013). The local languages of disadvantaged groups hold psychological, cultural and pedagogical values and

provide students from such communities with a self-recognition and identity and they hold important social and cultural meanings. In relation to the Nepalese education system, particularly the intended curriculum, the findings of this study reflect that a centralised school curriculum does not address the local needs of students and contemporary issues are not sufficiently contextualised.

The next major theme that emerged from the findings that has significant bearing upon the curriculum concerns the social, economic and cultural status of the learners. Family poverty and social exclusion play a major role when students fail to achieve the desired learning outcomes and undoubtedly impacts upon school retention (Chitrakar, 2007). All of the research participants agreed that an individual's economic condition affected their educational achievement. Similarly, a range of social and cultural factors could also negatively affect attainment (Dudaite, 2016; Parajuli & Das, 2013). Girls and children from lower caste and ethnic communities did not have equal access to education in Nepal. Consequently, the performance of the students in public schools seems unsatisfactory because a majority of the children from these communities go to public schools. Richer and professional Nepalese citizens generally send their children to private schools. Hence, it is understandable that socio-cultural diversity affects the learning experience of the students.

In the context of Nepal, in the past, educational privileges were mostly limited to higher caste groups. Hence, a higher propensity to drop out of school and lower learning achievement was common among girls and children belonging to ethnic groups, indigenous communities and *Dalits* (Stash & Hannum, 2001). Even today, a large proportion of students drop out before completing basic education (Department of Education [DoE], 2010). A majority of the cases of school dropouts are observed among children from diverse ethnic and indigenous communities who do not speak Nepali as their mother tongue (Yadava, 2007). Children are deprived of equal educational access and opportunities due to social and economic disparities. Hence, the findings clearly indicate that student achievement is, to a large extent, affected by the social, cultural and economic status of the family.

Further, the fields of education and politics are intertwined in Nepal. For a country that has gone through a series of political upheavals, almost all the political movements in the recent past have had a significant impact on education. A decade long Maoist insurgency and other political changes that occurred for the past few decades have had direct or indirect impact on school education. Political conflicts and education prominently engage two reciprocal and inter-related phenomena: the effects of political conflicts, strikes and violence on education (Lai & Thyne, 2007; UNESCO, 2010; UNESCO, 2011) and the role of education in reducing or contributing to such conflicts (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2004). Social and economic disparities avail favourable circumstances for political conflict and civil unrest. In such a fragile political condition, education plays a vital role. The education sector of Nepal has always been at the epicentre of political activities and movements (Pherali, 2013). Inevitably this political context influences and impacts on the quality of education. This study identified that political interference is not merely limited to the teachers' involvement in political affairs, but that it has also encroached into school management committees and even into teacher selection and recruitment processes.

The opinions of the research participants presented above (Table 2) indicate that educational sectors are integrally connected with political movements throughout Nepal. Political movements have been seen as surpassing educational agendas in their capacity to effect democratic change, social justice and enhanced freedoms. Pherali (2013) further argued that the educational growth of Nepal in the last four decades has mainly helped the upper-caste social elites who have monopolised social and political power. The culture of particular privileged social groups, Brahmin and Chhetri, still hold power and is dominant in almost all spheres of education, be it curriculum development, medium of instruction or assessment mechanisms. The modern education system of Nepal has legitimised the cultural, ethnic and caste-based hierarchies where high-caste males from the Kathmandu hills dominate the crucial realms of public life.

In relation to the content of the curriculum, findings indicate that the school curriculum can provide a path for students to cultivate their values and provide a way of life that not only values others equally but also makes them aware of citizenship rights and responsibilities (Bruniges, 2005). In such circumstances students and teachers embrace and acknowledge diversity contributing to the better educational environments for learning. All major stakeholders of education, politicians and corporations across the globe advocate school reforms that cater for the needs of all learners (Cheung & Wong, 2011). For the successful implementation of a curriculum, it requires a careful plan for curriculum innovation to be introduced so that students perform better at school. Implementing such innovation in the curriculum is a great challenge as new approaches need to address learner diversity and should cater for individual differences of students regarding their learning ability and their behaviour development (Cheung & Wong, 2011). Mfum-Mensah (2009) argued that if the curriculum content reflects communities' cultural values and contexts, stakeholders, including local community members, become empowered and emancipated in ways that ultimately benefit the broader community. Hence, there is a growing importance of context in the curriculum development process. In turn, the learning achievement of the students depends on teachers' content knowledge, their pedagogical know-how, classroom management skills, and adoption of individualised and culturally responsive approaches to learning. They should not only know the background of students in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity, but also be aware of their interests and life at home (Perso, 2012).

The findings of this study reinforced the reality that assessment mechanisms in Nepal are based on traditional written tests and are not student friendly. They have resulted in lower academic attainment by the students. When assessment mechanisms are child-friendly and are used as a learning tool in the class, assessment can motivate students and increase student engagement, help in metacognition promoting individual formative suggestions and feedback, and increase interaction between students and teachers (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007). Students' active engagement and participation in the decision-making process in assessment and evaluation mechanism improves their learning (Cukusic, Garaca & Jadric, 2014). Use of various assessment methods contributes to improved academic achievement and can also enhance the critical thinking capabilities of students.

Conclusion

Contemporary school praxis in Nepal is understood by the participants of this study to be largely influenced by centralised convictions and assumptions about the curriculum. The paradox is that despite the pluralistic and progressive words of the Nepalese policy statement of educational aims, the lived experiences of the major recipients of the curriculum—teachers and students—reflect a lack of capacity to shape learning experiences to particular contexts. The findings of this paper reveal that if the factors affecting curriculum development and implementation are properly recognised and reviewed by the concerned people in authorities, an improved congruence of intended, implemented and attained curriculum is possible that helps in securing better learning and attainment outcomes.

Generalisation of the findings from this study should be made with care as data obtained does not include representation of the Terai region due to ongoing political turmoil of Madhes-based political parties and impassable weather conditions of the Nepalese mountainous region during the data collection period. Similarly, this study does not cover the situation of private schools in Nepal.

Overall, however, the findings suggest that curriculum and textbook content selection autonomy could usefully be assigned to the local level aligning it to the recent political restructuring of Nepal into seven different federal states to cater for the needs of diverse ethnic/indigenous cultures. School education should encourage innovative approaches to learning, providing enough opportunities for students to express their knowledge and experience and incorporate student-friendly assessment mechanisms.

All of the major stakeholders of education maintain that for effective learning to take place in the class, the school curriculum should be locally-rooted and address the interests and needs of learners in their local context. They claim that they should be involved in developing and selecting curriculum

content and preparing textbooks. There was an agreed consensus that new and innovative approaches to learning and assessment techniques are required in Nepal to enhance learning experiences and outcomes for students. Similarly, educational institutions need to stay away from political activities that have adversely affected education in Nepal. The participants of this study suggested that some governmental interventions are required to promote equity in education, providing additional assistance to the children coming from poor and marginalised communities.

This study recommends further research on issues relating to the school curriculum in Nepal. This research might focus specifically on the skills, knowledge and values of Nepal's diverse indigenous communities that might be incorporated into the school curriculum. It might also explore how the existing knowledge distribution practices of indigenous communities might inform and enrich pedagogical practice throughout the different regions of Nepal.

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