

Challenges faced working in educational development in Nepal

Introduction and context

This document describes some of the challenges found by volunteers working to develop quality and inclusive education in government schools in Nepal. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but a summary of some of the key issues faced and suggestions on ways the issues might be addressed.

The political climate and education policies can change frequently. Therefore this should be seen as a working document, that can be updated and amended with new contributions and observations from volunteers. Different regions in Nepal also differ enormously, in terms of their social, political, geographical and cultural diversity. Therefore issues that may be very problematic in one place may not be observed, or may be much less relevant elsewhere.

1. In the classroom – resources and time

1A . Lack of resources

Quality and availability of learning resources strongly affects what teachers can do and many classrooms are bare, with little or no resources to use as learning aids. Often, classrooms have only a board and occasionally some posters. Children have core curriculum textbooks and are usually expected to provide their own note pads and pencils. Those who forget notebooks or pencils may be left with nothing to do during a lesson because schools often do not have spares.

Addressing this lack of materials requires time and creativity. Teachers often lack confidence or ideas in developing and using their own resources.

Public resources available for education are limited and often schools do not have extra budgets to be able to purchase sufficient learning resources.

Top Tips

- Develop low cost and no cost resources using cheap or free locally available resources (sticks, stones, bottles, real life objects).
- Support teachers to develop their own resources and ways of using them. Workshops could be a good way to model ideas and for teachers to make some resources they can take back to their classrooms.
- Use students as a resource – for example for maths as counting objects or each as a letter for spelling, (this may also encourage pupils involvement and interest in activities)

1B. Resources not used

Sometimes schools may have resources that are not used at all or not used to their full extent. They may be locked away in cupboards or kept in staffrooms. Libraries may be set up, but children may not visit regularly or have access to the books. Sometimes, donors may have provided materials but teachers have not been trained about how these can be used to support teaching or learning.

Resources may be stored in ways that they are inaccessible to all teachers or means that they are not well maintained. Shelves and cupboards require more expenditure but do mean materials last longer and help to promote regular usage of resources.

Top Tips

- Audit existing resources and help schools use them to their full extent.
- Think of the best way to teachers and children access to existing resources.
- Store resources so they are well maintained and accessible.
- Train teachers in the best use of existing resources.
- Encourage gradual inclusion of resources - possibly through asking each teacher to think of one new activity a week, or even a month, that can then be shared with others to build cooperatively.

1C. Learning time – Punctuality / school openings

There are often big issues with punctuality in schools and teachers may not be in classes on time for lessons. 45 minute lessons are often much shorter in reality and transition times from one lesson to another also eat up scheduled lesson time. Large amounts of lesson time may be spent checking homework. Frequent strikes, festivals and adverse weather conditions (such as monsoon rains, extreme heat etc...) can also mean that schools are often closed and children miss many days of schooling. All these factors can lead to a very low number of actual learning hours in classrooms.

Top Tips

- Use time focused games at the start of lessons to get students and teachers drawn in and to start lessons off at a good pace.
- Possibly encourage students to keep teachers to account on punctuality in a fun way? This is obviously dependent on the hierarchical structure and willingness of teacher for such a technique!

2. Diverse learners – inclusion and marginalised groups

2A. Poor attendance and out of school children

Whilst there have been improvements in the numbers of children on roll, in reality attendance at schools is often very poor, especially for children from poor and marginalised communities. This often links to health, nutrition and livelihoods issues – children may have to work to support their families. There can be high drop out rates for marginalised groups – children simply stop coming to school. Teachers and district staff often lack time and resources to follow this up or collect accurate data on drop out rates.

Repetition can lead to a big mix of ages in classes and is also costly to the government. There are often big problems with retention and repetition in Grade 1 as is something that ECD classes aim to address, making children more prepared for schooling and building basic social, emotional and educational concepts.

Top Tips

- Try to help develop accurate out of school monitoring surveys.
- Develop well planned accelerated learning classes to re-introduce these children to school.
- Consider links that can be made with local livelihood or health programmes.

2B. Hungry children

Many children are sent to school with little or no food. Where provided, Kajaas often consists of handfuls of beaten rice in a child's pocket. It is hard for children who are malnourished and hungry are less able to concentrate and learn.

Top Tips

- Where possible provide tiffin for children.
- Think of creative ways to provide food – perhaps a school garden could be started and parents could help to cook up vegetables or snacks for the children?

2C. Lack of inclusion

Differentiation is rarely used in lessons. Teaching is usually by rote, as one large group. Large class sizes can make inclusion very challenging for teachers.

Gender and caste discrimination may be seen in classrooms, with girls and lower caste children being treated unfairly – sat separately, teased etc... Parents of lower

caste children may feel unwelcome in school. There is also an under representation of teachers from marginalised groups.

There is a severe lack of knowledge, acknowledgement and support of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Many teachers have not had training to deal with this and schools are usually not equipped to provide facilities for disabled learners. Children with difficulties may be labelled as 'slow' and simply expected to keep up with the rest of the class during lessons. There may still be shame and stigmas associated with disabled children and this may prevent parents enrolling or bringing such children to school.

Top Tips

- Encourage the use of active teaching methods and differentiation.
- Develop anti-discrimination practices amongst staff and children. Workshops may be useful ways to raise awareness and for teachers to explore feelings of exclusion and feelings of inclusion
- Try to develop sensitive, discussion-based activities for staff to explore ideas attitudes that may underlie discrimination.
- Help teachers become aware of different types of SEN and strategies to support children. Try to provide workshops or training on ways to support children with SEN.

3. Teaching practices

3A. Teacher/student relationships

Children are often seen as passive listeners and lessons are teacher led. There may be little dialogue between teachers and students and a lack of support or rapport. There is often a lack of clear rules or expectations and may be little use of positive re-enforcement and praise during lessons. There is frequently a lack of support for less able children or those with difficulties and a general lack of awareness of children's rights. Teachers may lack knowledge and confidence in using child friendly teaching methods, which may be very different from the traditional rote teaching methods they themselves experienced at school.

Behaviour can be poor and may be 'managed' by the use of corporal punishment. This may lead to a climate of fear in the classroom. A majority of schools still have 'sticks' which are used to threaten or hit children who are misbehaving. Behaviour can be very disruptive in classrooms. There is a lack of knowledge of alternative behaviour management strategies and positive re-enforcement is rarely used.

Top Tips

- Encourage the use of child-friendly teaching methods.

- Clarify rules and expectations.
- Use positive re-enforcement.
- Try to encourage an attitude of life long learners to encourage positive relations between older learners (teachers and parents) and younger learners (students)
- Target parental and teacher opinions about corporal punishment through awareness raising workshops.

3B. Learning during lessons

Teachers often promote memorization by textbooks rather than real explorations of information, so the quality of learning may be low. The curriculum is designed to pass tests, as opposed to raising learning ability – thus children are taught to memorise facts and there is less focus on fostering understanding and practical application of ideas or creativity.

Textbooks and the language used in them is often ambitious and teaching style is usually rote learning. Blackboards may be over used and lessons may focus on copying or chanting. Little questioning is used, or checking of children's comprehension of texts and there is a lack of child-centred teaching strategies which focus on learners needs.

The Continuous Assessment System (CAS) is in the process of being rolled out but many schools seem unclear about the way this will be used and lack confidence in implementing this in their schools. In ECD classes, lessons may focus on handwriting and copying as opposed to the outlined play based curriculum. Children may be taught to memorise and chant letters and numbers, with little time spent developing a good understanding of early number and sound concepts.

Top Tips

- Where possible use resources and real materials to model ideas and support learning.
- Use individual, paired and small group work.
- Try to help develop a play based curriculum in early years classes.
- Develop skills in critical thinking, co-operative learning and problem solving. Workshops may be useful ways to model some example activities and strategies that teachers could use in their classrooms.
- Encourage the use of frequent and continuous assessment of progress as opposed to just summative exams.
- Train and support teachers to be confident in using the CAS.

- Give pupils regular feedback about their own progress and to help them formulate targets and goals.

3C. Planning

There is a lack of planning for what will be taught in lessons and often lessons may just consist of reading the next chapter in the text book. This means there is a lack of prepared resources of real objects utilised to enhance learning. It also means that little attention may be paid to the idea of sequencing learning tasks based on the outcomes of previous lessons. Seating plans and the best usage of classroom layout may not be considered.

Many teachers lack confidence in planning or do not have experience of using lesson or weekly plans, with clear objectives and ideas for lesson structure (teacher input, pupil activities, differentiation, assessment opportunities etc...)

Top Tips

- Encourage planning and sequencing of lessons and use of resources.
- Encourage planning of classroom seating and layout plans to facilitate learning.
- Encourage reflecting back on planning as part of process – perhaps this could be introduced and discussed during staff meetings.
- Give teachers a small amount to plan at first - that is easily manageable. Encourage sharing of ideas and plans to lower the perceived workload.

3D. English medium

It is often seen as desirable for schools to be switching to English medium whenever possible. This may be ambitious and requires strong English skills amongst staff. English teachers themselves may not be confident in conversing in English and lack of teacher capacity in English can affect children's learning. English text books are used, but there may be little practice of actually conversing in English or little understanding of what words and phrases mean. It is important for

Top Tips

- Try to be aware of the multi lingual basis of local communities and find out what languages are spoken in children's homes.
- Children should have some lessons and instruction in their mother tongue. Try to think of ways of involving parents to support this.
- Encourage having displays around school in different languages spoken by pupils.

4. School facilities

Many schools have buildings and/or classrooms that are in a poor state and do not currently provide a safe and welcoming learning environment. Classrooms may have a leaking roof, crumbling floors, broken or inadequate furniture and no floor covering or cushions in ECD. Some classrooms may be dusty and dirty with no bins available. Rooms are often poorly lit or ventilated. Walls are often bare with no work displayed or a few posters covering walls.

Children are usually responsible for sweeping the classrooms. Toilets are often also inadequate and lack of separate toilets for girls may deter some families from sending girls to school. Unclean or inadequate toilet facilities can also be a sanitation/ health problem. The provision of water for children to drink may also be an issue. There is a general need for safety and sanitation awareness and provision in schools.

Playgrounds may be unsafe or in a bad state of repair.

Top Tips

- Buildings and classrooms should be made as safe and welcoming as possible.
- Children and staff should be made aware of safety and sanitation.
- Resources should be made available for children to play with during break times and opportunities given for physical games and exercise.
- Encourage use of students efforts/work for decoration to increase ownership of the room. Develop display walls or corners showing recent work and topics.

5. School management and leadership

Successful schools need strong leadership, but often, head teachers are full time teachers in school. The roles and responsibilities of HTs and teachers are often unclear. HTs need to have the capacity to effectively monitor teaching and learning in their schools. HTs generally have little admin support and schools often have irregular staff and SMC meetings. There is often weak management of skills and inconsistent appraisals or monitoring of staff. There are often high levels of teacher attrition and absenteeism.

Head teachers hold very little power in terms of appointing/ promoting staff or saying who goes for training. Resource People hold much more power than HTs, but are responsible for large numbers of schools. This means it is hard for them to visit their schools regularly enough to monitor them effectively.

Top Tips

- The roles and responsibilities of HTs and teachers need to be made clear.
- Conduct a school audit - have HT and staff write down what they think their roles entail and what they think others roles are. If the environment is comfortable and open enough, people's responses could be discussed.

6. Strengthening knowledge flows

Centralised policies are often not well implemented in the districts. Information may not be disseminated sufficiently and this can lead to a lack of understanding at the district level. There is a need for stronger management of the decentralisation process and for local government and local education authorities to have more ownership of education in their areas, building accountability and awareness. Educational managers at all levels need advice on how to implement policies such as the SSRP and clarity on their roles and responsibilities within more decentralised structures.

Top Tips

- Encourage awareness and accountability at a local level.
- Find out how information is delivered in your district and the opinions of staff at different levels of the education system on current practices. Which things work well/ where do gaps arise?
- Try to advise on ways of implementing policies effectively at a local level – perhaps simplifying complicated documents and policies so they are more easily understood.
- Weekly "Did you know" notice in staff rooms or DEO. This could be a simple but clear piece of information with something that staff might not know that they should.

7. Parent participation

Schools often feel there is a lack of parent participation. Lack of parental education and low perceived relevance of education in rural families can hinder parents sending their children to school. There is a need for parental education and information about the importance of schooling.

There are also challenges when parents may have a negative view of child centred education (thinking that children should not be 'playing' and that 'real' learning consists of handwriting and memorising). This can be the case in ECD classes, where parents may prefer to see children at benches writing that taking part in creative play or learning games. Increased parental awareness about the benefits of child centred teaching strategies would help to counteract these perceptions.

Top Tips

- Develop parental information and education about the need for schooling and child centred learning.
- Involve parents by inviting them to events at school or having parent helpers involved in school activities. Utilise parents skills and knowledge in school – invite parents to model local trades or give talks to pupils.
- Help to organise workshops with different groups of parental stakeholders as to what should be on the local curriculum. Hold idea sharing groups.

8. Teacher's conditions and professional development

8A. Teachers capacity

Teachers have a lack of opportunities to share experiences or learn from each other. There is often unequal access to training and a feeling that terms and conditions for teachers are inadequate. Teachers often have very poor working conditions (physical environment of schools and classrooms). There is a need for the development of good practice publications and forums for teachers to share their ideas.

There is a lack of transparency in postings and promotion and teachers often have little voice in decision making. Hard work and merit may not lead to recognition or praise. All of these factors means teachers often suffer from low morale and motivation.

Top Tips

- Encourage teachers to share experiences and learn from each other by use of forums and good practice publications.
- Wherever possible help to improve teachers working conditions and give them a voice in decision making.
- Try to think of ways schools can schedule in time each week for teachers to share techniques and ideas.
- Think of ways to identify and promote positive role models of teachers and of those in leadership roles.

8B. Teachers pay and conditions

Many teachers are employed on temporary contracts, meaning they lack rights, pensions and privileges of those on long term contracts. They are left feeling uncertain about their long term career prospects. ECD teachers receive a very low salary and are often held in low regard compared to other teachers.

In rural areas, there may be a lack of available of trained teachers to work in schools.

Top Tips

- Help to lobby government to improve pay and conditions for teachers.
- Help with advocacy to raise voice of teachers. Have links with volunteers at Ministry and Department of education and keep up to date with what is happening at a central level.

9. Gender discrimination

9A. Lower priority given to girls education

Girls are less likely than boys to complete schooling and girl's education is a low priority for many families, with girls carrying out work at home or on the land. Many girls are also married at a young age. Issues to do with restrictions during menstruation, lack of separate toilets for girls, or dowries can also affect family decisions to ensure their daughters complete education. These factors mean drop out rates for girls are much higher than for boys. There is a need for awareness building and advocacy work in communities and at all levels of the education system about girls rights to education.

Top Tips

- Run teachers and parents workshops and pupil activities raising awareness of gender discrimination, both at school and at home. Run parent workshops focusing on the importance of education for boys and girls.
- Help schools to focus on ways they can ensure that boys and girls are treated equally in their schools.

9B. Under representation of women

Women are under represented in teaching roles and much fewer women than men hold senior management, district or government level posts. Whilst schools now have to have a female member on the SMC, they are usually greatly outnumbered by the men and may have difficulties making their voice heard. There is a need for women to become more actively involved in educational decision making, at all levels. Literacy rates for women in Nepal are still lower than for men and in ECD, where a majority of teachers are women, pay is very low and roles are often viewed as inferior to other teaching roles.

Top Tips

- Help to raise awareness of gender discrimination at district level and work closely with female staff to ensure their voices are heard and well represented.
- Consider developing empowerment programmes – idea sharing and advocacy groups.

10. Building accountability and targeting corruption

10A. Nepotism/ politics

Frequent changes in political leadership means that people at the DEO, MOE etc. shift posts frequently and that policy changes are hard to put into practice and develop at central level. Political instability has led to bureaucratic instability. A lack of policy continuity over time has led to confusion and poor channels of communication between the different levels of the education system.

DEO staff are often overburdened with admin work and there is a lack of effective inspection, monitoring and evaluation systems. Frequent bandas disrupt school openings and planned activities in schools. This may also contribute to negative parental perceptions of the quality of government education.

Political and kinship ties affect appointments/ promotions etc... and there are issues with gender discrimination – with very few female staff at district and central levels.

Concerns about the consequences of delivering school data that is not positive (e.g real attendance figures) means that data may not be representative. Negative data may mean a person is demoted/ transferred or have a reduction in privileges. This means situations may often be overlooked rather than reported or dealt with transparently.

Educational reporting focuses largely on quantitative data – attendance, exam results etc... rather than qualitative aspects such as teaching strategies and quality of teaching and learning provided in schools.

Top Tips

- Build into planning or volunteer work ways of gathering teachers positive feedback, and criticisms of methods used.
- Encourage teachers and district staff to reflect on current practices and think of ways to feed this information back to more central levels.
- Try to be aware of the way education can be used as a political engine – in terms of control over teacher training/ certification and it's regulation (in

association with colleges and universities). Find out more about the power and political associations of teaching unions.

10B. Equitable resource allocation

Distribution systems for educational resources are often weak or ineffective. For education to become more inclusive and to ensure that resources reach the most marginalised areas, they must be allocated fairly and transparently.

Top Tips

- Lobby the government for more equitable distribution of resources.
- Try to raise awareness and mobilise the local community to be aware of what resources they are entitled to – thus strengthening civil society to monitor the allocation of public resources.

10C. The private sector

Private schools are seen by many people as ‘quality’ education. The growing number of private schools creates a two tiered system of education and means those left in government schools are the poorest and most marginalised groups. These groups lack power and influence in society and may feel too weak to demand results and improvements in government schooling.

Top Tips

- Hold discussion groups with parents or local community representatives to discuss perceptions of government and private education and discuss ways to promote and develop education in government schools.
- Encourage parental and community support and ownerships of government schools in their area. Encourage dialogue and involvement in school activities and management.

11D. Community links

Schools need to mobilise community support and forge stronger links with the community. Increased local accountability for education requires local government and local education authorities to collaborate closely with local communities and civil society organisations.

There is a need for SMC’s to be more representative of the communities they serve – consisting of different groups/ genders etc... SMC’s also need to be more aware of how to using monitoring and assessment systems effectively and to develop SIP’s that address the quality of teaching and learning and inclusion as well as school maintenance issues.

There is also a need for development of relevant, useful local curriculum – addressing communities and children’s needs and educating children about local culture. Whilst 20% of the curriculum is supposed to be allocated to learning ‘local’

skills and needs, in reality this time is usually spent 'topping up' with additional English classes.

Often schools do not have strong links with other local schools. This means opportunities for sharing good practice or working together with local communities are missed.

Top Tips

- Develop and strengthen good links between schools and local communities.
- Work to make SMCs more representative of communities.
- Develop a relevant and useful local curriculum.

12. Our own attitudes and behaviours

It is important to be aware of how our own attitudes and behaviours can be interpreted by others and the effect this can have on working relationships. Living and working in a culture very different to our own brings a wide array of new things and situations for us to try to understand and make sense of.

- Try to highlight and build on positive practices and teachers' current skills and to boost people's self-confidence. Be aware of people assuming that you are an 'expert' who can fix everything or is here to tell them what to do. Focus on the idea of working in 'partnership' to share skills and ideas together.
- Try to be aware of your own preconceptions and assumptions. Try to be open-minded and ready to question and adapt your ideas.
- Take time to observe and reflect on what you see and hear. Situations and relationships are complex and things become clearer as you get to know more about the history and influencing factors involved. Try not to jump to conclusions or make snap judgements or decisions about things.
- Talk to your colleagues about your experiences, feelings and reflections.
- Hold regular volunteer discussion groups based on our own perceptions through use of stimuli and open-ended discussion methods.
- Try to communicate as effectively as possible with colleagues and be aware of your own and colleagues' and partners' working styles and approaches.
- Try to learn some of the local language and to think of ways to minimise language barriers – visual aids/ translations/ asking for help from those who speak some English etc...

