

A study of Nepalese teachers' life histories

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The donor driven practices in Nepal have largely contributed to make education and development external processes (Parajuli & Wagley, 2010:838). The study aims to investigate how do Nepalese teachers perceive their life and work in a context of global initiatives for educational change? The question is investigated through life histories of Nepalese teachers. The life history approach deals with the problem of structure and agency in which the history supplies both contexts in which to locate the teachers' narratives and the frameworks for interpreting it (Goodson 2011). How teachers respond to change and why teachers have been reluctant to pursue educational reforms is disclosed in understanding the cultural construction of society and teachers' moral beliefs. Understanding the origins of Nepalese teachers' perspectives lie in understanding the impact of biography—those experiences that have influenced a person's thinking about school and teaching. These life experiences and backgrounds are a part of a broader context- cultural, social, economical and political- that influence and shape teachers' work in Nepal.

Surprisingly, there is little that explores the cultural implications of developmental modernity within the realm of schooling (Carney and Rapple, 2011: 7). The aim is to develop local perspectives in order to respond to local challenges within education in a more relevant way. Preliminary results of the study show that Nepalese teachers have contrasting and conflicting motivations to that of aid programs. However, due to cultural constraints and value systems they find solutions to their problems that comply with those with formal power in the educational system. Teachers follow directions from the social hierarchy but have individual adjustments that adapt the reforms to their situation that are recognizable and appropriate to Nepalese teachers which are deeply rooted and hardly conscious. Nepalese teachers' narratives reflect a view of individuals that can only act within the boundaries of the social structure to endure their individual survival. The capacity to imagine other lives and develop a radically new sense of self has been in some way excluded. The aim for most teachers is to do better within the system. Paulo Freire argues that fatalism in the guise of compliance is the fruit of an historical and sociological situation, not an essential characteristic of a person's behavior (Freire, 2008: 61).

Historically many teachers have been on the forefront of national movements for political change and felt responsible for their fellow villagers' needs and protection (Awasthi, 2004:312). The new structural changes have eroded such visions from many of the traditional committed teachers. They are treated as a standardized performer of tasks, mostly defined by powerful aid agencies (Bhatta, 2010:23). This historical sense of mission has in some ways been destroyed by reforms that focus on practical child friendly methods, rather than philosophical and moral questions of social purpose. Reforms which deny, ignore or otherwise disvalue the sense of mission of committed teachers are therefore counter-productive. The contagion of disillusionment spreads the notion that teaching is a highly committed vocation on which professional men and women center their life worlds is destroyed (Goodson 2008:

61). Were this solely a matter of standards, it would be manageable, but it is behind this a collapse of social purpose and a destruction of more socially inclusive public practices (ibid.).

Freire's proposals of problem-posing education where "men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation"(Freire,2008:83). A discussion on what kind of beginning point does teachers knowledge and culture provide for pedagogical insights for teachers to become active professionals in a hierarchical cultural system would be highly appreciated.

Introduction

As a qualitative, life-history researcher I take the view that interpretations and analysis are inevitably shaped by my own biography and so in short will "write myself into" the background of the research. This study takes its momentum from my upbringing and childhood experiences in a Nepalese cultural setting. I grew up in Gorkha district and in Kathmandu during the 60ies and 70ties. In those days my parents worked in United Mission to Nepal' education program, mostly in the local government schools. I was fortunate to grow up as a native speaker of Nepalese language and culture. It was a condition of constantly moving in and out of two worlds, cultures and languages. Later after completing my studies in Norway I worked for several years as a teacher in various educational institutions in Nepal. The reason for drawing up these perspectives is connected to the discussion we might have at the end of this presentation on validity and method in relation to my role as a researcher in relation to narrative research.

When it comes to my professional life my work as teacher and advisor in Nepal provided many opportunities to meet with teachers in urban and remote rural areas that gave me a deeper understanding of the challenges of relating to teacher training packages based on western methods of teaching in light of their lives lived there. My conviction and experience became that teachers are capable of looking critically at their world and can perceive their personal and social reality. But it is in the encounters with the hierarchical structures that the personal is often lost or unspoken.

This brief presentation will be sharing ways of contributing to developing more localized and contextualized epistemologies deriving from the everyday perspectives of teachers in Nepal. In realizing the complexity of meanings of localized epistemology, it promotes the exploration of these stratified meanings both theoretically and practically

(Parajuli&Wagley,2010:836). The idea is to learn from local discourses and to understand from local values and not only from externally developed theories and concepts. The intention is to contribute to identifying globalized western agendas and ideologies and local agendas and knowledge. The donor driven practices in Nepal have largely contributed to make education and development external processes (Parajuli& Wagley,2010:838). Developing local perspectives and localized epistemologies of knowledge is in order to be able to respond to local challenges in a more meaningful way.

The institutionalized reform processes in Nepal have led to little change in classroom processes (Evaluation Report, 2009: 83). In all it is clear that the development of modern education in Nepal has resulted in "deeper inequality and a sense of a profound inner confusion" (Carney and Rappleye, 2011:2). These are conclusions drawn from a series of articles that respond to education reform in Nepal in recent years(Carney and Rappleye, 2011). From this point of view, it is meaningful to talk about the new reforms and prescriptions as working against the history and context of the teachers' life and work and by not investigating these concerns new crises are generated (Goodson, 2008:7). At the same time subjective narratives of Nepalese teachers, may disclose something of the way in which teachers respond to their cultural construction of society, in a context of reform processes for educational change.

When introduced with strategies and plans for school development in Nepal, teachers are often pushed into a shadowy existence. But the Nepalese teachers' voices are important in that they carry the tone, the language, the feelings, and the perceptions that are conveyed by the way a teacher speaks. Listening to Nepalese teachers, and studying their lives and work, will provide valuable insight into the new moves to restructure and reform schooling in Nepal. By failing to record the voices of ordinary teachers, published reports on programs for training teachers can actually silence them. There is a possibility that in decision-making, educational advisors might only speculate on teachers' motivations and might then be at risk of reducing teachers to objects that can be manipulated for particular ends.

But teachers' perspectives remain central to achievement in the educational endeavour. Understanding the origins of Nepalese teachers' perspectives lie in understanding the impact of biography—those experiences that have influenced a person's thinking about school and teaching. These life experiences and backgrounds are a part of a broader

context- cultural, social, economical and political- that influence and shape teachers' work in Nepal.

Research Question

Surprisingly, there is little that explores the cultural implications of developmental modernity within the realm of schooling (Carney and Rappleye, 2011: 7). The study aims to investigate how do Nepalese teachers perceive their life and work in a context of global initiatives for educational change? What is the nature of the life-world of Nepalese teachers? My aim is to explore Nepalese teachers' life-world.

Lifeworld

Understanding the origins of Nepalese teachers' perspectives lie in understanding the impact of those experiences that have influenced a person's thinking about school and teaching. The teachers live in a society with certain cultural and social values. These values determine how teachers perceive themselves and their work. Schutz and Luckmann in, "*The Structures of the Life World*", use the term social stock of knowledge to describe the elements that arise from the processes of historical accumulation of knowledge. The teachers' subjective knowledge is "derived extensively from the social stock of knowledge and what is familiar and taken for granted becomes solutions to practice".

In relation to the life world theory (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973) the value system teachers bring with them is part of the social stock of knowledge which is consequently a social system of interpersonal and motivational relevance. The reality which seems self-evident to teachers, that which Schutz and Luckmann describe as the "everyday life-world", is a world that is a structured social and historically given world (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974:6). Mostly the fundamental structures of our experiences of the life-world do not enter into our consciousness (ibid, 1974:109).

We are born into the life world that existed before we came into it, a structured social and cultural historically given world. This is the arena of teachers' actions and the value systems that teachers act from. In order to interpret the Nepalese teachers' life world, it becomes essential to also study the culturally and socially given world that they were born into. The study will be a step in developing better understanding of Nepalese

teachers' life-world related to their work. From this theoretical position the question is how to access Nepalese teachers' life-world?

Methodology

When adopting a methodological approach that deals with subjectivities it implies that the researcher doing a narrative research has to construct a strong justification of the methodology. As indicated this study is based around the portrayal of Nepalese teachers. The study aims at exploring how they experience their teaching and access their sense of life and work. The project aims to develop deeper knowledge of meaning making and understanding of Nepalese teachers. It will adopt a qualitative orientation to research. It will rely on a series of interviews of Nepalese teachers. I will analyse the interviews for their life histories and cultural understanding and also explore their understanding as the basis for a pedagogical starting point for professional development.

Ivor Goodson distinguishes between life stories and life histories. He defines life stories as "the story we tell about our life", but life histories are stories about someone's life linked to a wider cultural and political context. Life histories follow the dominating structures in society and follow existing power patterns. That is why, according to Goodson, life history research takes narration of lived experiences one step further. Life history goes beyond the personal, and it places life story accounts and interpretations in a broader context- personal, historical, social, and political (Goodson 1992:6). Even though the inquiry is interested in how teachers make their lives into stories, the objective of the life history inquiry is to understand these stories in a broader historical context (Goodson, 1992:6). The interviews are conducted relatively unstructured, as informal encounters. The focus is to cover topics like childhood and schooling experiences, why a person became a teacher and how they experience teaching. What we might call occupational stories.

We tell stories using the narrative forms available to us within our culture (Goodson 1995). The stories depend upon the social contexts we experience and how we are socially positioned. Rather than attempting to make unrealistic claims for representing reality, life historians should simply acknowledge that they can offer an interpretation through their writing and spell out influences that may have colored the teller's story and their interpretation of it (ibid.). What we capture is a mediation between the personal

voice and the wider cultural imperatives. Social structures can push storylines in particular directions and the stories then legitimate the structures. Stories can resist as well as enhance the imperative structures. The life history approach deals with the problem of structure and agency in which the history supplies both contexts in which to locate the teachers' narratives and the frameworks for interpreting it (Goodson 2011).

When moving from life stories towards life histories other documentary sources is included like in the case of Nepalese teachers. As a part of my theoretical considerations I include local cosmologies to help me understand teachers' lives and perspectives from the local viewpoint and how it affects school practices. Local theoretical knowledge may be more meaningful to the local context in that the data and the interpreting tools originate from the same setting. Local cosmologies deepen my own knowledge about local values and help me understand the underlying principles of the Nepalese context. These cosmologies reveal connections between life and spiritual dimensions that shape teachers' lives and affect school practices.

Literature related to the underlying philosophical beliefs to educational practices, must be investigated from the departure and the continuous with the past, emphasizing the dominance of Hindu religion as the shaper of educational practices in Nepal. Teachers' narratives are seen as part of the social history with links to the historic narrative (Chambliss,2009). For the anthropologist of popular Hinduism, ethnography, not scripture is the major source and evidence for interpretation. Hinduism embraces people's views and values, behaviors and customs. Hinduism is a living civilization that influences people's life and spirituality (Jain.1994:1-13). C.J Fuller writes " no social analysis can be undertaken successfully unless we grasp adequately the people's own culturally constituted understanding of their actions. Conversely, we cannot accomplish the latter task unless we interpret social action in relation to the ideologies and institutions of society, which are apprehended as an external reality by people of flesh and blood living in a material world " (Fuller. 2004: 8).

Literatures that explore the role of externally developed theories and concepts in ways in which these regimes re-order understandings of school, teachers and pupils are documentary sources for interpretation. The largely uncritical adaptation of imported systems and values such as those embedded within the 'modern' educational project must thus be seen in a historical context and therefore, necessarily, as part of a colonialist genealogy" (Carney and Rappleye, 2011: 4). Analysis within the development "industry" of the progress in Nepal has been varied, if not disastrous (ibid.). From this perspective processes of change have been

bound up in systems of power that are inherently unequal and exploitative and can be understood as consequences of globalization in ways that “perpetuate historic inequalities” (Carney and Rappleye, 2011:5).

Nepalese teachers’ life histories

On the basis of exploring life stories in a broader context preliminary findings of the study indicate that Nepalese teachers have contrasting and conflicting motivations to that of rights based, child centred aid programs. Issues like *hierarchy, caste, dependency, less job opportunities, poverty, rote learning, and discipline* are elements of teachers’ life stories. These common elements give a common perspective that produces a sub-culture that is deeply rooted. From my studies so far it appears that teachers’ attitude and culture towards teaching is to follow the traditional ways of teaching despite the governments massive interventions to modernize teachers through curricula, textbooks and teacher training. Teachers’ kinship to traditional education is expressed through their maintenance of teacher- student hierarchies in the class, emphasis on the teacher-centered teaching, oral lessons and rote learning/memorization. Teachers have a strong teacher identity in their ability to teach the curriculum and discipline students.

Even though teachers seem to be reluctant to pursue “modern” education and see it as foreign to their traditions and beliefs, teachers seem to comply with the reform programs. Due to cultural constraints and value systems they find solutions to their problems that comply with those with formal power in the educational system. Teachers follow directions from the social hierarchy but have individual adjustments that adapt the reforms to their situation that are recognizable and appropriate to Nepalese teachers.

Individuals interpret what confront them and organize their actions on the basis of the interpretations. Strategies are selected and guided, it seems, by a wide range of factors, but the most dominant seems to be the traditional hierarchy of relations. The social hierarchy is to be the fundamental relationship in society. These relationships have an appropriate type of interaction in accordance with the relative superior/ inferior position. Appropriate ethical principles for a given relationship according to superior / inferior are considered in order to respect the superior. Persons who assume the role of superior should make decisions and allocate resources. And for those who assume the role of inferior the principle of duty, obedience, submission and loyalty to the instructions of the superior (Kwang-Kuo Hwang, 2001).

These findings are reflected in Colin Lacey's (1977) work in relation to teacher socialization. I have leaned on Lacey's use of concepts like "*situational adjustment*", "*strategic compliance*" and "*Internalized adjustment*" in developing theoretical framework in this account. Mainly two varieties of situational adjustments are recognizable. Some seem to deliver new initiatives like child friendly activities and are prepared to shift and change. Initial outcomes indicate that some individuals adjust to the new contingencies, transforming themselves into the kind of person the situation demands, there is an internalized adjustment in which the individual complies with the constraints. This might also imply that individuals who initially assumed an inferior position in the social hierarchy seem to deliver new initiatives when guided by superiors that they rely on for guidance defines the situation. But most are seemingly unresponsive to change. They comply strategically with the definition of the situation but retain reservations of the constraints. It might also indicate that others who initially held a more superior position in the hierarchy for the most *strategically comply* with authority figures definition of the situation, but they seem to retain private reservations about them and are inflexible to change.

Compliance

Nepalese teachers' narratives reflect a view of individuals that can only act within the boundaries of the institution to endure their individual survival. A person is allowed to transform the system only so far as to increase its functioning, but cannot influence its values and rules. Self-expression has to exist within role defined boundaries of the institution. Individuals can access resources and status through survival strategies that are directed by the framework of context. The cause of distress is in the dimension of the agency to access and control resources and the kind of relations within which this dimension occurs. Paulo Freire's view on how the oppressed perceive themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression (Freire 2008: 45). Fatalism in the guise of compliance is the fruit of an historical and sociological situation, not an essential characteristic of a person's behavior (Freire, 2008).

The banking concept of education, as Freire calls it, is mostly practiced in Nepal and demands compliance and memorization. "The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them" (Freire, 2008: 73). According to Freire the banking concept of education is in conjunction with a paternalistic social action apparatus where individuals are

led to adopt to the system and can easily be dominated. Based on a mechanistic static view of consciousness it transforms students and teachers into receiving objects. It controls thinking and action and leads people to adjust to the system and submersion. Banking oriented education isolates consciousness of the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human (Freire,2008:74). Global initiatives for educational change operating in a “banking” style will fail, according to Freire it undermines peoples’ ability to think and act.

In this particular context hierarchical structures additionally enforce the perception of limitations. The local social anthropologist DorBahadurBista argues, it is not principally the presence of foreign aid that is corrupting, but fatalism and ascriptive values and readiness to accept these hierarchical systems that is “the legacy of the hierarchic caste attitudes” (Bista, 1999 :148). He claims that the values of hierarchic, high caste, Brahminsdominate the current value system and these values subvert social advancement. It is not the power of global forces that is the root cause, but the root cause to inequalities is the fatalistic and hierarchical value system that is already there, he argues (ibid.). This additional dimension is important to take into consideration when analyzing Nepalese teachers’ life world. It is not only the constraining forces of poverty that limits choice, but the historical inheritance of hierarchy, inequality and hegemonies that direct individual purpose.

Conclusions

Although historically teachers have been on the forefront of national movements for political change and have played proactive roles in social reform processes in the country they tend to retain their traditional perspective on education(Awasthi 2004: 312). Traditionally teachers felt responsible for their fellow villagers’ needs and protection. The new structural changes have eroded such visions from many of the traditional committed teachers. They are treated as a standardized performer of tasks, mostly defined by powerful aid agencies (Bhatta,2010:23). The teachers are treated as an agent of the system, complying with the dictates of others and closely monitored as to the level of performance. This historical sense of mission has in some ways been destroyed by reforms that focus on practical child centered methods, rather than philosophical and moral questions of social purpose, thus implying the conflicts and contradictions between the different discourses within education in Nepal.

Reforms which deny, ignore or otherwise disvalue the sense of mission of committed teachers are therefore counter-productive. The contagion of disillusionment spreads the notion that

teaching is a highly committed vocation on which professional men and women center their life worlds is destroyed (Goodson 2008: 61) Were this solely a matter of standards, it would be manageable, but it is behind this a collapse of social purpose and a destruction of more socially inclusive public practices (ibid.).

Lacey points out from his studies that change is brought about by individuals who do not possess the formal power to do so. They achieve change by causing those in formal power to change their interpretation of the situation (Lacey, 1977: 73). *Strategic redefinition* of the situation implies that change is carried out by powerful persons who are not in formal power positions. Freire's proposals of problem-posing education describes an approach where "men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation". His view of dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship which challenges the social and not only the individualistic character of the process of knowing.

Awasthi writes "since teachers' traditional roles were not taken into account and no sincere efforts were made to negotiate their *Gurukhul habitus* (traditional education), no plans could yield desired results (Awasthi 2008: 312). Freire's dialogical approach describes a way to take into account the historical sense of mission of Nepalese teachers. The exploration of traditional religious and philosophical faith systems as a source for insight can contribute to cultivate motivation and professional development. At the same time building knowledge on aspects of hierarchy, inequality and hegemonies contributes to realizing constraining forces and challenging them. What kind of a beginning point and challenges does teachers' knowledge and culture provide for pedagogical insights for teachers to become active professionals in a hierarchical cultural system in light of problem posing education?

Secondly, Freire's dialogical way describes an approach to resolve the "teacher – student contradiction" for a student among students relation. This implies the challenge that lies in the role of the researcher in dealing with subjectivities and the validity of the data. Furthermore, it implies a strong justification of the methodology and the teacher – student aspect in relation to the role of the researcher. A discussion on this aspect of the study would be highly appreciated.

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