

# Education for social justice in rural Nepal

---

## **ERT: Individual Paper Submission**

### **Education for social justice in rural Nepal: towards an integrated theoretical framework and operational research strategy for supporting intervention**

Michael Wilson

*School of Education, University of Leeds, UK*

Email: [m.d.wilson@education.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:m.d.wilson@education.leeds.ac.uk)

Individual Paper

September 2014

## Abstract

By way of background, the paper first assesses the challenges and potential barriers facing the reform programme to promote social justice through improved educational provision and opportunity in rural Nepal. The discussion focuses on the contested role of education and problems relating to the effective implementation of positive change. These problems and their possible solutions are analysed within a broad socio-political context. The second half of the paper focuses on the research implications. In view of the complexity of the challenges, there is an emphasis on the need for innovative interdisciplinary and international research which can inform both educational policy and practice and achieve high impact. The Capabilities Approach is explored as a conceptual framework for promoting wellbeing and social justice through education, supported by operational research strategies and techniques based on the principles of Participatory Action Research and Critical Systems Heuristics. Research priorities are suggested by way of conclusion.

**Key words:** rural education; social justice; exclusion and marginalisation, Capabilities Approach; Participatory Action Research; Critical Systems Heuristics.

## Introduction

Nepal is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked 138th of 169 countries in the Human Development Index, where a third of the population live below the poverty line (UNESCO, 2011). It is also very diverse, consisting of at least 103 ethnic groups, including indigenous minorities (*Janajatis*), and marked social divisions along lines of gender and caste. Although officially abolished in 1963, the caste system is still deeply embedded in the national culture, especially in the less developed rural areas, resulting in the marginalisation and exclusion of people from the lower castes, particularly the *Dalits*. A significant consequence of marginalisation and socio-economic disadvantage has been rural-urban migration and rural emigration as an economic survival strategy (Gurung, 2000; Gartaula, 2009). Women and children are most exposed to discrimination, with the result that gender inequality remains a serious challenge (Rothchild, 2006).

Government commitment to social justice is evident in Nepal's comprehensive agenda for reform. Progress was limited by the political instability of civil war and the Maoist uprising of 1996-2006 (Rapple, 2011), while the transition process to a federal democratic state continues since the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in 2012. Nevertheless, there has been a trend towards political decentralisation through the Local Self Governance Act, 1999, which has opened up long-term opportunities for democratisation, including greater engagement and empowerment of local communities in the governance of education. The Education for All (EFA) National Plan for Action 2001-2015 and the School Sector Reform Plan 2009-2015, with support from UNESCO and other external agencies, have identified key priorities for the long-term improvement of rural education, including the eradication of inequality, guarantees of social inclusion and guarantees of a fundamental human right to quality educational services (UNESCO/UNEPF, 2013). Achieving these

objectives will require investment in the country's educational infrastructure (particularly addressing the non-availability of secondary school places in rural areas); improving the transition from primary to secondary education; promoting tolerance, inclusion and understanding through citizenship education; raising awareness of health issues (especially HIV/AIDS); and improving both the quality of pupil learning and teacher competency / performance (UNESCO, 2011; UNESCO/UNPFN, 2013). These policy priorities are a useful starting point in understanding the nature of the challenges ahead. However, all too frequently well-intentioned policies assisted through foreign aid and other supporting interventions face problems of implementation due to gaps between design conceptions and organisational realities at the local level.

The broad aim of the paper is to suggest how research can provide a way forward in helping to bring the Government's commitment and vision for the improvement of rural education to fruition. In providing a contextual analysis, the paper first outlines the nature of the challenges and potential barriers to educational change. This is followed by a discussion of future research implications, focusing respectively on innovative research design and operational research strategies as a means of effectively responding to these challenges and contributing to both research-informed policy and practice in Nepal's rural educational provision.

### **Challenges and Potential Barriers to Change**

The challenges facing an educational reform programme in rural Nepal are complex and multifaceted, extending beyond exclusively educational concerns to include such issues as health promotion, poverty reduction and democratisation to ensure the effective implementation of centrally-driven reform initiatives. If research is to play its part in helping

to inform the educational reform process, it must be innovative drawing on international and interdisciplinary expertise to tackle such complex and wide-ranging problems. The analysis which follows is structured around two highly contested issues related to educational provision: the role of education and the implementation of educational change.

### **The contested role of education**

The role and purposes of education are the subject of debate (Hart, 2012, p.7). It is for this reason that educational reform is frequently ideologically driven rather than based on the engagement of stakeholders and a determined effort to achieve consensus. Four competing ideological perspectives are discussed in terms of their perceived relevance to the goals of rural education in low-income countries, including Nepal.

First, the functionalist perspective emphasises the instrumental role of schools in sorting and preparing young people for future social roles in keeping with their abilities, skills and aptitudes. Human Capital Theory, for example, emphasises the purpose of education as an investment in the development of skills related to future employability and economic productivity. This is an important consideration, not only from the perspective of national needs but also individual needs in acquiring income-generating skills, which ‘can make all the difference between starving and surviving and between merely surviving and having a decent life’ (Robeyns, 2006, p.72). However, the functionalist perspective has significant limitations. The sorting, selection and preparation of children for future roles tends to be driven by targets, tests and school league tables – by their very nature exclusive and unfair in widening divisions along lines of gender and social class. Drawing on the English experience of a failure of well-intentioned reforms to close the educational achievement gap between the social classes, Goodson (2008) is critical of what he describes as ‘Curriculum as Prescription’

imposing the ‘stranglehold of the academic tradition’ (p.128), which only serves to benefit children from the higher social classes advantaged by greater reserves of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) and motivated by more ambitious career aspirations in accordance with the predictions of ‘positional theory’ (Boudon, 1974). The instrumentality of Human Capital Theory also underplays the more intrinsic, aesthetic and cultural purposes of education as something of value and joy in its own right, capable of enriching the lives and promoting the wellbeing of children, both as individuals and as contributory members of society.

Second, an intrinsic value perspective of education as a ‘common good’ addresses this very limitation. It is rooted in the discourse of human rights: that education ought to be a universal entitlement, irrespective of the potential contribution of the individual to the economic welfare of the nation. The emphasis therefore switches from efficiency considerations to moral, social and political concerns: first, by enabling children to realise their full potential and to enjoy the personal fulfilment and social benefits that an education can provide; second, in preparing children for their future participation as citizens and parents through the promotion of social understanding and cohesion, citizenship education and political participation (Tomasevski, 2003, p.33; Robeyns, 2006, p.5). Such a rights-based discourse of education is endorsed by the United Nations, for example, through the EFA initiative and the closely related eight international Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for 2015, including universal primary education, gender equality, associated targets for poverty and child mortality reduction and combating HIV/AIDS. However, the rights-based discourse, despite its obvious moral appeal, has practical limitations. While many developing countries (including Nepal) have signed up to these declarations, there are concerns regarding high drop-out rates, poor educational infrastructures and the poor quality of teaching in some of the most deprived regions. Well-intentioned goals therefore tend to be rhetorical rather

## Education for social justice in rural Nepal

---

than achievements of substance, especially in the provision of sustained quality education for disadvantaged, marginalised groups. Education as a *legal right* is a necessary but insufficient condition to ensure the effective delivery of these goals. Declarations must be effectively enforced and implemented by government, and perhaps more importantly embedded in society as a *moral right* to create the necessary level of commitment and obligation within civil society beyond that of government alone to ensure that policies work in practice (Robeyns, 2006, p.76). This raises important questions about tackling constraining social factors associated with deeply-rooted traditional social practices and cultural beliefs which still create barriers to educational opportunity for girls, children of lower social castes and children of some ethnic minority groups.

The third perspective is rooted in the virtue of *paedia*: a vision of education through which society becomes democratic and free from domination, with implications for promoting social, economic and political autonomy and freedom (Sargis, 2003). Such a radical egalitarian vision of the role of education has been most strongly associated with Freire's seminal work on the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). According to Freire, education has a key role to play in raising the level of consciousness to effect social transformation towards greater freedom and equality of opportunity, not only through raising the awareness of the oppressed or disadvantaged to enable them to play a key role in their own liberation, but also through raising the consciousness of the privileged classes in rethinking their own values and reflecting on their own role in perpetuating social inequality and injustice (p.70). Freire's philosophy calls for a critical pedagogy in moving away from what he described as the 'banking' approach, whereby both students and teachers are dehumanised through a schooling system which treats students like empty bank accounts awaiting deposits of knowledge from their teachers (p.77). Teaching and learning should be based on engagement and dialogue as a means of shaping and developing both the person and

## Education for social justice in rural Nepal

---

society through *conscientisation* (p.54). Inspired by Freire, Bell Hooks (1994, p.6) advocates ‘teaching to transgress’ against racial, sexual and class boundaries in order to achieve the gift of freedom. Such critical pedagogy combines ‘action and reflection on the world in order to change it’ (p.14). It requires the active engagement of students with an emphasis on wellbeing and self-actualisation: teaching and learning which is progressive and holistic; above all conducted in a manner that ‘empowers students’ (p.15). Such a radical perspective of the liberatory role of education has major implications for the wellbeing and progression of disadvantaged and marginalised groups in rural Nepal. It raises not only key questions about what should be taught but how it should be taught if egalitarian policy objectives are to be achieved in practice. However, despite the appeal of ‘conflict theorists’ (Hart, 2012, p.7) in directly exposing and tackling social and educational injustices, ‘conflict’ may come at a price. There is nothing in Freire’s critical pedagogy, for example, which addresses more conventional curricular issues, such as the unresolved debate on a core or common curriculum as an entitlement. Radicalisation may also create barriers in itself to the progression and wellbeing of disadvantaged and marginalised rural groups in generating suspicion and even greater resistance to social change from powerful interest groups. Tessman (2005), for instance, explores the potential moral harm to self in resistance to oppression. What she describes as ‘burdened virtues’ may detract from the individual’s wellbeing, as in the case of ‘oppositional anger’, perceived as a virtue in confronting injustice, but with potentially negative consequences, especially where anger is misdirected, results in a corrosive effect on the self, or damages social relationships including prospects of redress or reconciliation (pp.130-131).

The fourth and final perspective derives from John Dewey’s pragmatism, which in many ways synthesises some of the key educational arguments advanced through the first three perspectives. The pragmatic essence of Dewey’s philosophy is based on a view of individual



## Education for social justice in rural Nepal

---

learning as socially embedded and inextricably connected to interaction with the environment (Dewey, 1933). Effective learning is therefore a profoundly experiential, interactive and reflective process, exemplified in an intimate relationship between school and society, learning by doing and the notion of education as life (Dewey, 1915). A further enduring influence of Dewey's work was his passion for democracy (Dewey, 1916), recognising the significance of knowledge as power and the need to engage non-elites in local communities in order to 'democratize the education policymaking process' (Oakes *et al.*, 2008, p.36). Dewey's work had a profound global influence on progressive education movements, including a number of educational innovations in the reconstruction of rural communities in China during the early 1920s, serving as an interesting illustration of indigenous adaptation. In particular, Tao Xingzhi applied both the principles of pragmatism and democratisation through his Xiaozhuang experimental school in ways that adapted and radicalised Dewey's philosophy to the specific needs and priorities of Chinese rural communities (Zhou, 2005, p.7). His priority was a refutation of the traditional elitist system of Chinese education, which produced 'book fools' (*shu daizi*) and perpetuated 'false knowledge' separated from the realities of life (Yao, 2002, p.107). In conflating pragmatism and democratisation in his rural education programmes, he aimed at rural reconstruction through an education system that would enable village communities to achieve self-sufficiency. However, Tao Xingzhi's radicalisation of Dewey's pragmatic philosophy was arguably flawed by its overemphasis on the practical, characterised by 'a marked anti-intellectualism, because academic learning was not a concern of rural educational reform and reconstruction' (Yao, 2002, p.108).

Each of the four competing educational ideologies has discernible advantages and disadvantages as a model for educational development in rural Nepal. However, the models are not mutually exclusive and when considered together can offer a balance of strategic options capable of meeting the specific needs and priorities of the Nepalese rural context.

Such strategic choice has clear implications for the effective democratisation of an educational policymaking process which engages local communities. It also has implications for building local capacity in resource provision and the professional skills of teachers and school leaders to ensure that strategic choices are effectively implemented.

### **The implementation of educational change**

At one time, ‘policy was expected to be self-implementing, given necessary resources, regulation and resolve’ (McLaughlin, 2008, p.175), but policy implementation is now widely acknowledged to be complex and highly problematic. The early failure of international aid initiatives to improve public health in rural Nepal serves as a salutary reminder. The ethnographic research of Justine Justice (1986) attributed this gap between policymaking and programme implementation to a complex combination of factors, including stifling bureaucracy, language and cultural barriers, lack of capacity at the local/village level, policy leakages due to the intervention of ‘middlemen’, and a lack of understanding of the perspectives and problems facing frontline workers. Education policy research has also tended to neglect complex issues of implementation, especially the impact of policies on the daily working lives of students, teachers and school leaders in their struggle to translate policies into practice (Ball, *et al.*, 2012). What follows is a deeper analysis of the challenges of the implementation process, drawing on both political and management perspectives, followed by a consideration of the implications for effective educational policy implementation in rural Nepal.

From a political perspective, Flyvbjerg (1998) in his study of policy implementation in Aalborg (Denmark) found that despite well-formulated rationally conceived plans, the implementation process was significantly fragmented with unanticipated and undemocratic

consequences. In his conceptualisation of the underlying problem, he drew a distinction between notions of *rationality* and *power* and the dynamic relationship between them in the workings of modern democracy. *Rationality*, based on enlightenment ideals such as freedom, human rights and social justice, provides a basis for reform agendas based on reason and sound argument. However, *power* has the potential to resist *rationality* when privilege and self-interest are defended through *rationalisation*. In the Danish context, Flyvbjerg identified an asymmetry in favour of the negative ‘rationality serving power’ (a *rationalisation* of privilege, inequality and the status quo) over the positive ‘power serving rationality’ (aimed at supporting social and educational change to achieve a fairer and more inclusive society). In effect, the Aalborg study was an extreme case sample of a city in a highly democratised society. If replicated in other less democratic contexts, it can be safely extrapolated that political obstacles to effective implementation at the local level are likely to be even more pronounced. In applying Flyvbjerg’s analysis to the Nepalese context, despite the current enlightened programme of social reform, Adhikari (2006, pp.290-292) draws attention to a continuing propensity to exclude minority groups, a concentration of control and power in high caste male Hindus, and a gap between ‘saying and doing’; in other words, a ‘commitment in the speeches ... not translated into practice to improve the decentralisation process’ (p.292).

From a management perspective, the problem of effective policy implementation is attributed to technical issues, including inadequate communication, understanding and commitment, along with differences in policy interpretation. Heeks’ model of conception-reality gaps (Heeks, *et al.*, 1999) provides a helpful framework of analysis, suggesting that the wider the gap between the *design conceptions* (at the point of policymaking) and the *organisational realities* (at the point of policy implementation) the greater will be the risk of policy failure, as a result of a mismatch between the worldviews of policymakers and

## Education for social justice in rural Nepal

---

stakeholders working at the frontline, and/or a mismatch between policy aspirations and sector realities, e.g. on account of limited resources. A further complicating factor relates to gaps arising from contextual and cultural differences, especially in knowledge, skills and technology transfer from externally funded projects that demonstrate insufficient understanding of local constraints and/or opportunities.

The political solutions will undoubtedly require relatively long-term strategies: what Flyvbjerg describes as a *longue durée* approach in achieving progress not only through constitutional and institutional reform, but also through facing up to unfair mechanisms of power and practices related to class and privilege more directly and head-on. It requires what Adhikari (2006, p.301) describes as ‘empowered participation’ if decentralising policies are to engage more than just local elites and thereby democratise local decision making. Education has a vital role to play in this long-term process, particularly along the lines of Freire’s vision of *conscientisation* and the promotion of active citizenship, especially among marginalised and disadvantaged groups. It is not only a question of what the Nepalese constitution can do for education, but what education can do for the creation of an inclusive democracy for the future political stability of the country.

Management solutions to the policy implementation gap will require what McLaughlin (200, pp.186-187) describes as ‘systems learning’, based on research-informed policy – learning gained from experience and acquisition of new knowledge from effective communication and collaboration in following clearly marked ‘implementation pathways’, supported by appropriate timelines and adequate resources, not only to help initial implementation but also long-term sustainability. Effective policy implementation and sustained change therefore depend on decision making which is neither exclusively top-down, nor bottom-up, but as far as possible consensual and respectful of the views of targeted beneficiaries in the reform process.

## Research Implications

From the discussion so far, it is clear that research into education for social justice in rural Nepal is so complex and multifaceted that it requires a research design that is ideally both interdisciplinary and international supported by diversely talented research teams, including researchers not only with technical expertise but local knowledge. It has been suggested that educational reform cannot be separated from political and socio-economic contexts, especially the constraints on participatory local democracy and the negative impact of poverty, ill health and embedded social attitudes which perpetuate marginalisation according to differences in gender, caste, religion and ethnicity. Policy narratives are currently dominated by considerations of inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation (UNESCO, 2010; Aikman & Dyer, 2013). There is therefore a requirement for research to focus on these and related issues of social justice, power, voice and representation in finding ways how educational policies and practices can promote greater social opportunity to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of disadvantaged, marginalised groups. Such a mission will require a far stronger research focus on those marginalised groups who are ‘hard to reach’ (UNESCO, 2010, p.136), with significant challenges regarding physical access, language and communication. A holistic research design which locates educational enquiry in a wider social and political *reference system* would therefore seem most appropriate. The Capabilities Approach is one such design which offers promising research potential.

## Research design: the Capabilities Approach

The Capabilities Approach originated with Amartya Sen (1993, 2005, 2009) in the 1980s as an alternative to resource-based theories of welfare economics and human

wellbeing, especially in developing, low-income countries. Capabilities are the real opportunities an individual has to lead a fulfilled life, and as such represent the freedoms of individuals to pursue what they value in order to flourish and achieve wellbeing. Such a conception transcends a notion of wellbeing simply in terms of material resources, as important as these are, to concerns of freedom of choice. Capabilities are translated into actual achievements and a realisation of personal goals through ‘functionings’, such as enjoying good health, gaining access to a quality education and gaining access to a rewarding and satisfying job. It can be readily appreciated that where there are restrictions on people fulfilling their capabilities because of structural inequalities in society human flourishing will be denied. Social constraints, such as family responsibilities and expectations, can also lead people into ‘adaptive preferences’ (as opposed to ‘autonomous preferences’), whereby they sacrifice or compromise personal choice for the sake of others (Hart, 2012, pp.23-24).

There has been debate as to whether a definitive list of human capabilities should be defined as a universal human right and therefore a ‘strategic tool’ for ensuring capabilities. Martha Nussbaum (1993) has provided a list of ten normative human capabilities, which serve as a useful checklist for monitoring human rights and entitlements as embodied in global commitment to the principles of EFA and other such initiatives. However, definitive lists are problematic and the concept of social justice exceedingly difficult to define; according to North (2008, p.1183), ‘a contested, value-laden expression’. Overly prescriptive approaches should be avoided, especially as shared perceptions between people in different cultural contexts cannot be assumed. The involvement of stakeholders through an inclusive and participatory democracy requires ongoing democratic deliberation and public reasoning on what constitutes a good life. As White (2007, p.23) points out: no community of experts can define precisely what this should be. It is for these reasons that Amartya Sen (2009, p.viii) is surely right in grounding the Capabilities Approach in the removal of social injustice: ‘What

moves us is not the realisation that the world falls short of being completely just ... but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us that we want to eliminate'. Bufacchi (2012, p. 9) outlines three dimensions of social injustice that require the remediation to which Sen refers: injustice as 'maldistribution'; injustice as 'exclusion' (or marginalisation); and injustice as 'disempowerment'. Nancy Fraser's (1997, 2010) three dimensions of social justice are a corollary: 'fair distribution' of resources including education; 'recognition' of diversity and varying contributions from different groups with links to respect, cultural justice and self esteem; and 'representation' with implications for communication, democracy and inclusion.

The Capabilities Approach has spread to a wide range of social science disciplines, including education, which should have an important role in tackling social injustice and conversely promoting social justice. What has emerged from the research evidence is that access to schooling in itself is no guarantee of expanding capabilities or 'functionings', or of promoting greater freedom and general wellbeing. Schools, for instance, may continue to discriminate against children on account of gender, class, caste, curriculum access or allocation of resources, including the best teachers (Hart, 2012, p.46), and thereby 'perpetuate marginalisation' (UNESCO, 2010, p.135). Moreover, school enrolment figures, frequently quoted as a key measure of progress in educational provision in developing countries, are no guarantee of the quality of education offered or student retention because children may be obliged to leave school because of pressures of 'adaptive preference' (Hart, 2012, p.46). While statistics can be useful educational indicators they fall far short of providing the understanding of capabilities and education that can be acquired through in-depth qualitative research (Maddox, 2010). Boyden's insightful longitudinal study of childhood poverty and education in four low-income countries, for instance, challenges assumptions about the low aspirations of children in lower social classes. He concludes that schooling is seen as a

means of escaping household poverty and gaining upward social mobility, but the shortcomings of education systems fail to deliver on those aspirations (Boyden, 2013). In spite of the potential of the Capabilities Approach, Hart (2012, p.45) concludes that ‘operationalizing notions of capability within educational institutions as well as realms of educational policy is still in its early days’. The next subsection therefore focuses on how operational research strategies aligned to the Capabilities Approach (when applied specifically to the Nepalese rural context) can be developed by drawing on insights from Participatory Action Research and Critical Systems Heuristics.

### **Operational Research Strategies**

As an underlying research philosophy, Participatory Action Research goes beyond institutional boundaries by involving marginalised and disadvantaged groups in the co-construction of knowledge of their conditions and how these can be changed (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). Much in keeping with Freire’s principles of critical pedagogy, participants are treated as partners rather than focal objects in the research process, enabling their voices to be heard and their views to be taken into account (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009, p. 4). Of fundamental importance to understanding the perspectives of these disadvantaged groups is an acknowledgement of, and respect for, *indigenous knowledge*, the bedrock of the worldview of local communities. Without such empathetic cultural understanding, well-intentioned policy interventions are unlikely to be effective, as learned from the experience of early policy failure in the case of various public health initiatives in Nepal (Justice, 1986). Although indigenous knowledge systems have been recently recognised, Weber-Pillwax (2009, p.46) concludes that ‘there remains a basic and profound societal and professional ignorance in relation to how such knowledges (*sic*) are to be incorporated or given consideration in the administration and programming of contemporary schooling systems’.



## Education for social justice in rural Nepal

---

Critical Systems Heuristics provides a useful tool for conflating various research strategies that can begin to address these research priorities effectively. It has been broadly defined as ‘a framework for reflective professional practice organised around the central tool of boundary critique’ (Ulrich & Reynolds, 2010, p.243). Essentially, it provides a framework for researchers to manage the tensions between multiple, frequently opposing, perspectives between stakeholders that arise in situations of professional intervention. Its epistemological foundations are: (a) *systems thinking*, which takes a holistic, meta-level reflective perspective of a so-called reference system, including, for example, the wider socio-political context of educational reform; (b) *practical philosophy*, including the pragmatism of Dewey (1925), with a focus on research which can deliver positive impact and ensure ‘reflective and emancipator practice’ (Ulrich, 2005, p.2). The defining concepts of *critique* and *heuristics* can be best understood in terms of the research process as tools for ‘cogent critical argumentation’ (p.13) in discovering practical solutions to commonly shared concerns. This is achieved through dialogue and boundary critique/judgements as to what issues should be included, left out and considered important or less important, thus providing a vehicle for stakeholder inclusion and local capacity building (p.2). The underlying rationale behind Critical Systems Heuristics as method is: making sense of situations through an understanding of the big picture; revealing multiple stakeholder perspectives as a means of promoting mutual understanding for finding solutions; and promoting reflective professional practice, e.g. of policymakers, school practitioners and researchers.

However, to date little use has been made of this approach to address complex educational problems (Watson & Watson, 2011). In addressing this lacuna, a Critical Systems Heuristics framework, adapted from Ulrich & Reynolds, (2010, p.244) for addressing the educational research challenges for rural Nepal, is provided in the table in Appendix 1. The framework consists of 12 key boundary questions. These provide the basis

of dialogue, mutual understanding and reaching boundary judgements as a means of maximising the prospect of effective supporting interventions in considering *stakeholders* and in identifying *concerns* and *issues/challenges* that must be addressed. The overarching framework includes four key sources of influence: *motivation* (the underlying purpose of the research intervention); *control* (the necessary power and resources); *knowledge* (the necessary sources of expertise and experience); and *legitimacy* (the grounds for social and legal approval of the intervening initiatives – a key ethical dimension).

### Conclusion

The paper set out to provide an overview of the key challenges facing rural education in Nepal followed by a discussion of the potential application of the Capabilities Approach, operationalised through applied research strategies, based on the principles and techniques of Participatory Action Research and Critical Systems Heuristics, designed to maximise positive impact and the chances of effective implementation. Precise focal points of future educational research in rural Nepal should therefore ideally be discussed and agreed with fellow researchers (able to provide a combination of international and cross-disciplinary expertise), policymakers, educational professionals, civil society leaders and representatives of local marginalised communities with expert local knowledge. However, some preliminary suggestions for future research in terms of *choice of focus* and *choice of method* are offered as a basis for dialogue and debate.

Choice of focus raises the question: *what* should be researched? A case has already been made to justify a broad ‘reference system’ that places rural education in its much wider socio-political context in tackling social injustice. This macro perspective focuses on education policy, the politics of education and socio-economic constraints and enablers,

including an understanding of local cultures, embedded traditions and how these might be negotiated. This is especially important in addressing broader issues of poverty, marginalisation and structural obstacles to the progress of disadvantaged groups. Alongside this, understanding of the role of aid agencies and civil society leaders in promoting the wellbeing will provide insight into effective supporting interventions. A macro perspective will also need to be balanced by a micro perspective based on school-based research in marginalised, hard-to-reach communities with a suggested focus on three key issues. First, *innovative teaching and teacher development*, addressing the practical difficulties facing schools with limited resources; how and to what extent such schools collaborate in the best interests of children in their localities, innovate to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and deploy their resources (financial, material and human) to maximise opportunities for development. Second, *parental and community engagement*, addressing how and to what extent schools manage family-centred practices which are both *relational* (e.g. in terms of effective communication) and *participatory* (e.g. in terms of active parental involvement in decision making and support of their children's education), and how and to what extent they are able to capitalise on the support of charities, NGOs and other school benefactors. And, third, *school leadership*, addressing how and to what extent school leaders are able to eliminate social injustice and promote social justice through a 'socially just pedagogy' (Furman, 2012, p.197).

Choice of methods raises the question: *how* should the research be conducted? The methods are likely to be mixed, drawing on quantitative measures to assess achievements over time and to identify priorities for action. However, an inclusionary and participatory focus will rely heavily on engagement with key agents and stakeholders through in-depth case study and qualitative methods, including interviews and classroom observations. Key agents and stakeholders, while including policymakers and influential leaders of civil society,

should also encompass the key beneficiaries of supporting interventions, including frontline practitioners in schools (the teachers and head teachers), members of the local community (including parents and village representatives) as well as the children themselves (Fielding, 2007). Especially promising in terms of potential impact in working with disadvantaged and marginalised groups is engagement based on narrative enquiry (Goodson, 2013), which in the words of Bathmaker & Harnett (2010, p.3), can ‘provide a means of getting closer to the experience of those whose lives and histories go unheard, unseen, undocumented – ordinary, marginalised and silenced lives’.

### REFERENCES

- Adhikari, D. (2006) *Towards Local Democracy in Nepal: Power and Participation in District Development Planning*, Spring Research Series 47, Kathmandu & Dortmund: Spring Centre, Faculty of Spatial Planning, Universität Dortmund.
- Aikman, S. & Dyer, C. (2012) Editorial: Education and inclusion: re-examining the narratives, *Compare*, 42 (2), pp.177-185.
- Ball, S.J., Maguire, M. & Braun, A. (2012) *How Schools Do Policy: Policy Enactments in Secondary Schools*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bathmaker, A.-M. & Harnett, P. (eds.) (2010) *Exploring Learning, Identity & Power through Life History & Narrative Research*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Boudon, R. (1974) *Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality*, New York: John Wiley.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.C. (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, London: Sage.

- Boyden, J. (2013) 'We're not going to suffer like this in the mind': educational aspirations, social mobility and independent child migration among populations living in poverty, *Compare*, 43 (5), pp.580-600.
- Bufacchi, V. (2012) *Social Injustice: Essays in Political Philosophy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1915) *The School and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York: Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1925) The development of American pragmatism, *Studies in the History of Ideas*, 2 (Supplement): 353-377.
- Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*, Boston: D.C. Heath.
- Fals-Borda, O. & Rahman, M.A. (1991) *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action-Research*, New York: Apex Press.
- Fielding, M. (2007) Beyond 'voice': New roles, relations, and contexts in researching with young people, *Discourse*, 28 (3), pp.301-310.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1998) *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Fraser, N. (1997) *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*, London: Routledge.
- Fraser, N. (2010) *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, New York: Columbia University Press (paperback edition).
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.

## Education for social justice in rural Nepal

---

- Furman, G. (2012) Social Justice Leadership as Praxis: Developing Capacities through Preparation Programs, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48 (2), pp.191-229.
- Gartaula, H.N. (2009) *International Migration and Development in Nepal*, [www.thefreelibrary.com](http://www.thefreelibrary.com) [retrieved on 6 March, 2014].
- Goodson, I. (2008) Schooling, curriculum, narrative and the social future, in: C. Sugrue (ed.) *The Future of Educational Change: International Perspectives*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.123-135.
- Goodson, I. (2013) *Developing Narrative Theory: Life Histories and Personal Representation*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gurung, Y.B. (2000) Can Child Migration in Nepal be explained under a Modernisation Perspective? *Population and Development in Nepal*, vol.7, pp.135-152.
- Hart, C.S. (2012) *Aspirations, Education and Social Justice: Applying Sen and Bourdieu*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Heeks, R., Mundy, D. & Salazar, A. (1999) *Why Health Care Information Systems Succeed or Fail*, Institute for Development Policy Management, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, [www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/research/publications/WP/government/igov\\_WP09.htm](http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/research/publications/WP/government/igov_WP09.htm) [retrieved on 8 June 2014].
- Hooks, B. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, London: Routledge.
- Justice, J. (1986) *Policies, Plans and People: Culture and Health Development in Nepal*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Kapoor, D. & Jordan, S. (2009) Introduction, in: D. Kapoor & S. Jordan (eds) *Education, Participatory Action Research and Social Change: International Perspectives*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.1-14.
- Lawoti, M. (2005) *Towards a Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural Society*, London: Sage.
- Kapoor, D. & Shizha, E. (2010) Introduction, in: D. Kapoor & E. Shizha (eds) *Indigenous Knowledge and Learning in Asia/Pacific and Africa*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.1-14.
- McLaughlin, M. (2008) Beyond ‘misery research’ – new opportunities for implementation research, policy and practice, in: C. Sugrue (ed.) *The Future of Educational Change: International Perspectives*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.175-190.
- Maddox, B. (2010) Marginal returns: re-thinking mobility and educational benefit in the contexts of chronic poverty, *Compare*, 40 (2), pp.213-222.
- North, C.E. (2008) What is All This Talk About “Social Justice”? Mapping the Terrain of Education’s Latest Catchphrase, *Teachers College Record*, 110 (6), pp.1182-1206.
- Nussbaum, M. (1993) Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach, in: M. Nussbaum & A. Sen (eds) *The Quality of Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp.242-269.
- Oakes, J., Renée, M., Rogers, J. & Lipton, M. (2008) Research and community organizing as tools for democratizing educational policymaking, in: C. Sugrue (ed.) *The Future of Educational Change: International Perspectives*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.136-154.
- Rappleye, J. (2011) Different presumptions about Progress and Divergent Prescriptions for Peace: Connections between conflict, development and education in Nepal, in: J. Paulson (ed.) *Education, Conflict and Development*, Oxford: Symposium Books.

- Robeyns, I. (2006) Three Models of Education: Rights, Capabilities and Human Capital Theory, *Theory and Research in Education*, 4 (1), pp.69-84.
- Robinson-Pant, A. & Singal, N. (2013) Researching ethically across cultures: issues of knowledge, power and voice, *Compare*, 43 (4), pp.417-421.
- Rothchild, J. (2006) *Gender Trouble Makers: Education and Empowerment in Nepal*, London: Routledge.
- Sargis, J. (2003) Liberating Ethics, Education, Paedia and Democracy: Experiences of the US Education System, [www.democracynature.org/vol9/sargis\\_education.htm](http://www.democracynature.org/vol9/sargis_education.htm) [retrieved on 17 August 2014].
- Sen, A. (1993) Capability and Well-Being, in: M. Nussbaum & A. Sen (eds) *The Quality of Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp.30-53.
- Sen, A. (2005) Human Rights and Capabilities, *Journal of Human Development*, 6 (2), pp.151-166.
- Sen, A. (2009) *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tessman, L. (2005) *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tomasevski, K. (2003) *Education Denied*, London: Zed Books.
- Ulrich, W. (2005) *A Brief Introduction to Critical Systems Heuristics*, [http://projects.kmi.open.ac.uk/ecosensus/publications/ulrich\\_csh\\_intro.pdf](http://projects.kmi.open.ac.uk/ecosensus/publications/ulrich_csh_intro.pdf) [retrieved on 28 July 2014].
- Ulrich, W. & Reynolds, M. (2010) Critical Systems Heuristics, in: M. Reynolds & S. Holwell (eds) *Systems Approaches to Managing Change: A Practical Guide*, London: Springer, pp.243-292.



## Education for social justice in rural Nepal

---

UNESCO (2010) *EFA Global Monitoring Report: Reaching the Marginalised*, Paris:

UNESCO.

UNESCO (2011) *Country Programming Document for Nepal 2011-2013*, UNESCO Office:

Kathmandu

UNESCO/UNPFN [United Nations Peace Fund for Nepal] (2013) *Planning Effective*

*Delivery of Education in a Future Federal State*, UNESCO Office: Kathmandu

Watson, S.L. & Watson, W. (2011) Critical, Emancipatory and Pluralistic Research for

Education: A Review of Critical Systems Theory, *Journal of Thought*, 46 (3-4), pp.63-77.

Weber-Pillwax, C. (2009) When Research Becomes a Revolution: Participatory Action

Research and Indigenous Peoples, in: D. Kapoor & S. Jordan (eds) *Education,*

*Participatory Action Research and Social Change: International Perspectives*, New York:

Palgrave Macmillan, pp.45-58.

White, J. (2007) Well-being and Education: Issues of Culture and Authority, *Journal of*

*Philosophy of Education*, 41 (1), pp.17-28.

Yao, Y. (2002) Rediscovering Tao Xingzhi as an Educational and Social Revolutionary,

*Twentieth Century China*, 27 (2), pp.79-120.

Zhou, H. (2005) *The Spread and Impact of Deweyan Educational Philosophy in China.*

[http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/coce/pdf\\_files/vi](http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/coce/pdf_files/vi) [retrieved on 31 May 2014]

# Education for social justice in rural Nepal

## APPENDIX 1

### Applied Critical Systems Heuristics: An Adaptive Analytical Framework for Educational Research in Rural Nepal (adapted from Ulrich & Reynolds, 2010: 244)

Sources of Influence	Boundary Questions and Judgements Informing a System of Interest		
	Stakeholders	Concerns	Issues/Challenges
<b>Motivation</b>	<b>1.Beneficiaries</b> <i>Who ought to benefit?</i>  Marginalised rural communities and their children Policymakers School practitioners	<b>2.Purposes</b> <i>What ought to be the purposes?</i>  Promoting social justice & tackling injustice through education Promoting educational opportunity and social mobility Providing evidence for research-informed policy and practice	<b>3.Measures of Improvement</b> <i>What ought to measure success?</i>  Quantitative measures and benchmarks Qualitative insights from key stakeholders Consideration of processes as well as outcomes
<b>Control</b>	<b>4.Decision makers</b> <i>Who ought to have control over the decisions?</i>  Research teams in consultation with stakeholders, including rural communities, children and their families, school leaders & teachers, policymakers, civil society leaders and research funders	<b>5.Resources</b> <i>What resources are needed and how should they be controlled?</i>  Financial resource funding from research councils and other sponsors Human resources in the form of research teams and consultants	<b>6.Decision Environment</b> <i>What conditions of success should be outside the control of decision makers?</i>  Accountability to beneficiaries and funders including feedback Transparency Impact factors Sustainability of benefits
<b>Knowledge</b>	<b>7.Experts</b> <i>Who ought to provide relevant knowledge and skills?</i>  Professional researchers appropriate subject and investigative skills/knowledge Civil society leaders Stakeholders and research participants	<b>8.Expertise</b> <i>What ought to be relevant knowledge and skills?</i>  Interdisciplinary, international research teams capable of a holistic understanding of complex interrelated problems Stakeholders with local knowledge Cultural awareness and understanding	<b>9.Guarantors</b> <i>What ought to be regarded as assurances of effective implementation?</i>  The transparency of the knowledge base of the system as a means of assessing the validity of knowledge claims and the positive impact of supporting interventions through triangulating evidence from independent expert reviewers and stakeholder perceptions
<b>Legitimacy</b>	<b>10.Witnesses</b> <i>Who ought to represent the interests of those affected but not involved?</i>  Voicing the interests of those stakeholders who cannot be directly engaged in the research and the long-term impact of supporting interventions on future generations of rural children	<b>11.Emancipation</b> <i>What ought to secure the emancipation of those affected by research-informed change and reform?</i>  The question of transcending legal rights through moral rights deeply embedded in civil society with deep commitment to social justice	<b>12.Worldviews</b> <i>What different visions of improvement and wellbeing ought to be considered, and how should they be reconciled?</i>  Pluralism of views on the role of education Mutual respect and reconciliation Participatory dialogue as a basis for consensus and/or compromise if change is to be legitimated and willingly implemented

