

Could do better: Education in Nepal and users' perceptions of the state

Key messages

- Since the end of the Maoist insurgency in 2006, there have been tangible improvements in government education.
- No gender, ethnicity or caste discrimination was found in using school facilities, nor, with one exception, in school attendance.
- Quality education seems to rely heavily on individual leadership rather than local monitoring or national inspections.
- Few people understand the purpose of school management committees or the role of local and national government in education provision.

Government spending on education in Nepal has increased in recent years, in a push to meet the Millennium Development Goal for 100% universal primary education by 2015. The state¹ provides free primary education (up to Grade 5); and charges minimum fees for secondary (Grades 6-10) and higher secondary (Grades 11-12) education, with scholarships available for outstanding students and those from marginalised groups, such as Dalit² students. National efforts have been boosted by substantial bilateral and multilateral assistance, and the net primary enrolment rate has increased by almost half since 1990 (from 64% in 1990 to 95.3% in 2013). This is even more significant given the impact of Nepal's decade-long Maoist insurgency: about 3,000 teachers in conflict areas left their jobs, 700 government (state) schools closed, and both Maoists and state have been accused of the disappearance, detention and death of several hundred teachers and students.

Even before the insurgency ended in 2006, the government began to move towards community managed schools. Between 2003 and 2009, more than 8,000 state (public) schools were transferred to a system where government retains the final authority, but management responsibilities are transferred to communities to improve operations and local ownership. This has increased primary school enrolment and decreased school drop-out rates (World Bank 2009); even in conflict-affected areas schools are doing relatively better.

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Some parents now choose state over private education based on quality rather than cost

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My daughter did not show any interest to go to school. So we married her off.
Female respondent, Janajati, Budagaon

Gender discrimination persists in parental choices about schooling: boys are still more likely than girls to be enrolled in a private school

Yet in spite of such reforms and a further 2012 government directive that aims to improve standards and facilities in schools, the quality of teaching and facilities in state schools is still seen as lower than in private schools. However, cost means that state education is the only option for most families. In this context, the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR) examined people's perceptions of state education in Rolpa District, an under-developed area in Nepal's mid-western region and a major flashpoint of the insurgency. The study forms part of NCCR's contribution to the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), an eight-country, six-year research programme investigating how people in places affected by conflict make a living and access basic services such as education, health, water; social protection; and livelihood services.

Methods

The study explores people's perceptions and experiences of state education service delivery and links these to perceptions of government at different levels, drawing on data from:

- SLRC's 2012 longitudinal survey, conducted by NCCR among 3,175 households in three districts of Nepal, including Rolpa; and
- NCCR's follow-up qualitative study in 2013 in Liwang and Budagaon Village Development Committees (VDCs) of Rolpa District, comprising in-depth interviews with 52 respondents³, broadly split by gender and caste (Tandukar et al., 2015). We looked in depth at attitudes to two contrasting schools: Bal Kalyan Higher Secondary School, in Liwang, Rolpa's district headquarters; and Jana Kalyan Secondary School, in more rural Budagaon.

Key findings

1. Barriers to accessing education have reduced

People in rural areas of Nepal have historically faced a number of obstacles to accessing education: distance from school, financial and administrative hurdles, discrimination, and poor school facilities. The study found progress in all these areas.

In general, pupils walk to school. Respondents thought that the time required to walk to school had decreased, and that getting to school was easier than it once was, thanks in part to road improvements in both VDCs. People in Liwang typically took up to 30 minutes to get to school; in Budagaon, it took about 60 minutes. (See Section 2 below.)

State school fees were seen as nominal compared to private school fees and are a major factor in the choice to send children to state school. Private schools charge from 500 to 1000 Rs per month; both the state schools in our study charge 1,440 Rs per year (about USD 14 as at June 2015). With most respondents earning around 400 to 450 Rs per day, the majority say they can afford the state school fees, although there were exceptions in Budagaon. According to the quantitative survey, across Rolpa about 55% of boy respondents had to pay school fees, while only 49% of the girls said they did.

Respondents were generally positive about school admittance and administrative procedures. They could complete the necessary paperwork easily and ask the school administration for assistance if required. Parents had to be present during admission, which they felt helped build positive relationships with the school. If both the parents

were not present, there were some reported difficulties in admitting the children.

Historically lack of facilities such as toilets and drinking water has negatively affected school attendance. State schools with the best facilities tend to be established in district centres rather than in outlying settlements, and this was true of our study. The Liwang school had been renovated and facilities substantially improved; this was seen as a factor in its increased enrolment. However in Budagaon, there were no such improvements, raising questions about budget allocation, use and monitoring in remote areas:

There is no drinking water and toilet facility in this school at all. You have seen it, haven't you? There are faeces all over the playground. But who cares? Me and my sisters have to go to school anyway.
(Female respondent, Budagaon)

Access to school is guaranteed, and the study did not find evidence of any discrimination in accessing education. Nor was discrimination found in terms of ethnicity and caste when using facilities at either school. Dalits, low-caste groups and handicapped students were given preference in admission to both schools and provided with scholarships. There were no cases of corruption or favouritism reported. However, in Budagaon, some respondents from higher castes such as Brahmins and Chhetri were unable to afford the school fees and felt it was discriminatory that scholarships are provided only for Dalits, marginalized and outstanding students. They hoped that the government would expand scholarship provision. There was one case of gender discrimination by a school: Liwang's headmaster thinks married girls distract other students and fears they influence other girls to drop-out to get married⁴. He has therefore stopped admitting married girls even if they are willing to study. While, apart from this, no evidence of direct gender discrimination by schools was found, it did persist within families. For example, boys were more likely than girls to be sent to private schools.

2. Attendance is improving and drop-out rates reducing

The quantitative study showed that 72.6% of boys and 73.2% of girls in Rolpa attended school every day, and 24.8% of boys and 23.9% of girls attended most of the time. While physical barriers to attendance have reduced, pupils in Rolpa tend to stay away from school during the rainy season when roads and high hill tracks are in bad shape. This even affected children in Liwang who live closer to their school. Overall, survey respondents perceived that pupils attended more regularly than in the past and generally people had a good understanding of the importance of sending their children to school. Of the 45 respondents in Liwang and Budagaon who sent their children to state schools, 37 said that their children went to school regularly except when they were sick, when they had household work to do, and during rainy seasons.

The two schools in the qualitative study differed in their approach to managing attendance. Liwang has improved attendance by checking the pupil register twice a day,

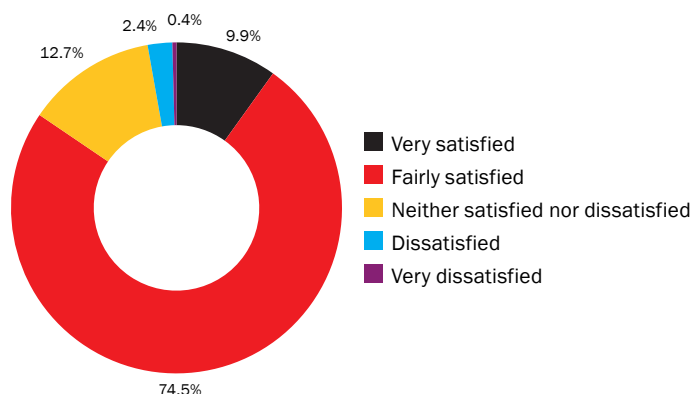
fining pupils for being absent without a valid reason, and introducing harsher punishments for non-attendance that could lead to expulsion. It has also improved attendance by teachers: they have received warnings or salary cuts for irregular attendance. However, in Budagaon, respondents thought that pupil attendance was less regular than it should be because of weak school management.

Dropping out of school is common across Nepal. According to the Ministry of Education (2013), only 69.4% of the pupils enrolled in Grade 1 make it to Grade 8. And the Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) (2010/2011) found that 34% of the population aged 6 years and above had never attended school. Nor is this problem limited to rural areas (Pun 2014). However, our study respondents believed that fewer students than before were dropping out. Reasons for the decreasing drop-out rates related to people's growing awareness of education and, in the case of Liwang, improvements in school management and people's trust in the school. Eight respondents had family members who had dropped out of school. There was no difference between rural and urban settings: drop-outs in both areas tended to be boys leaving to work or girls to get married and the consequent need to take on additional household responsibilities.

3. Satisfaction with state education services is broadly positive, but poor exam results have a negative effect

Of the 52 respondents to the qualitative survey, 32 were fully or partially satisfied with school services in Liwang and Budagaon. This correlates with the quantitative survey in which 74.5% of respondents across Rolpa were fairly satisfied. Respondents in Liwang said they were highly satisfied (see Figure 1) with the state school based on its management and facilities; they saw these as equivalent to private schools, and as a result some people had shifted their children to Liwang's state school from the private education system. In Budagaon, people were largely satisfied, although they had complaints about school facilities and – with fewer options in their rural area – they felt compelled to send their children to state school despite its perceived lower quality.

Figure 1: Respondents' satisfaction level with education services in Liwang and Budagaon



Source: adapted from Upreti et al., 2014

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The school management committee looks after the capacity, qualification, and quality of the teacher regularly.

Easier access Thanks in part to road improvements in both Liwang and Budagaon, pupils now face a walk of 30-60 minutes to get to school

Respondents generally perceived teachers' qualifications and their ability to teach their subjects positively. Although there were exceptions, most teachers were seen as qualified to teach. One particular source of satisfaction in both schools, not common elsewhere in Nepal, was the opportunity to get feedback on their children's performance:

Nowadays when we ask about our children's education, the teachers tell us how they do in school. Though I am not that educated, I get to know how my children are performing. (Male respondent, Budagaon)

Respondents were less satisfied with School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam performance. The exam is taken at the end of Grade 10 and is seen as the gateway to jobs and further education. Children in state schools are widely thought to be predestined to fail, as reflected in the low SLC pass rate of 41.57% (Kantipur 2013). Substantial improvements are needed before people will believe that the state schools are equally as capable of delivering high-quality education as private schools.

4. Understanding of the roles of local and central government in state education is limited

Both schools have school management committees (SMCs) consisting of nine key people in the community, as mandated by government. These include community leaders, educated people, political leaders, influential persons, female representatives and the school headmaster. The main work of the SMC is to monitor teachers and students, improve infrastructure, and deliver a better education service. Both SMCs have been making efforts and are positively perceived by those who are aware of their role. However, most respondents are not aware of the part that the SMCs play in their children's education even though they have been in operation for a

long time. Liwang SMC has accomplished more in terms of formulating plans, hiring teachers, looking for extra funds and building teacher capacity.

Both SMCs have a major role in addressing people's concerns and complaints about education. The only complaints that had been received about teachers related to poor teaching, teaching styles and children's development, not about teacher behaviour or excessive punishment. It may be that people feared that filing such complaints could have negative impacts on their children's education, suggesting that grievances relating to punishment and teacher behaviour in schools might remain unaddressed.

Respondents were not aware of how the education budget was distributed among schools in their district; there appeared to be no established mechanism to inform parents of the total budget of the school, and parents could not say how budgets were allocated within schools nor who managed this. However, people involved with SMCs said that they tried to share information on the budget, but that most people were not interested or too busy.

There is very limited understanding of the roles of local and central government in education provision. Most parents expect better management of state education by the government, but respondents were not clear about the roles of the VDC and central government; indeed, most thought neither the VDC nor central government played any part in managing the schools and influencing education. People knew the budget came from central government via their VDC, but they did not have a positive impression of the VDC's role in education. This suggests that neither the VDC nor central government are visible in terms of contributing to the education sector.

Conclusions and recommendations

Significant progress has been made in rebuilding education services in the post-conflict period, but much remains to be done to improve access, quality and resources. We found tangible improvements in state education in the schools studied, with Liwang in particular suggesting that dynamic school leadership can enable state education of real quality. People seem to have reasonably high levels of satisfaction with their education services, and progress on accountability has been made, mainly via SMCs. Many of the physical, financial, administrative and social barriers to accessing education have been reduced. However, access alone is not enough to ensure quality education. This was reflected in both schools, for example in concerns about exam success.

Respondents clearly expected the state to play a role in education and would like state education to be more consistently of a high quality and to be able to compete with private education. People had little perception of the roles played by the VDC and central government in providing educational services.

We recommend that stakeholders, policymakers and development partners consider:

- Possible options for **widening school provision in rural areas**, where parents may have only one school of poor quality. The poor facilities at Budagaon raised questions about budget allocation, use and monitoring in remote areas.
- Improving consistency through **effective monitoring and evaluation at state level**. More active monitoring of schools' functions and activities by the state could enable sharing of lessons learned about what works in more successful schools, as well as improving service delivery.
- Increasing transparency about the roles of the VDC and the state in education provision. There is a need to **address the lack of public understanding about the role of local and national government in education provision** and demonstrate accountability beyond the school and SMC levels.

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Notes

- 1 Education system in Nepal include: a) Primary – Grade 1 to 5; b) Lower secondary – Grade 6 to 8; c) Secondary – Grade 9 to 10; d) Higher secondary – Grade 11 to 12; and e) University level – Bachelors and above.
- 2 Traditionally the most disadvantaged caste.
- 3 Parents and teachers were interviewed for this study; students were asked informally about perceptions but these were not recorded as part of the formal tally.
- 4 Though the legal age of marriage in Nepal is 20 years, girls from rural areas usually marry when they are 16 or 17 years old. In some cases girls younger than 16 elope, perhaps because of peer pressure to get married.

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