

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

2021

THE ANNUAL KATHMANDU CONFERENCE ON

NEPAL & THE HIMALAYA



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Not all the papers presented at the conference were submitted for publication; some were published in other platforms while others remain unpublished. The conference schedule is provided in the appendix of this volume. The full list of presentations made at the conference along with the abstracts submitted can be viewed at www.annualconference.soscbaha.org.

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Social Science Baha

345 Ramchandra Marg, Battisputali, Kathmandu – 9, Nepal

Tel: +977-1-4572807

info@soscbaha.org | www.soscbaha.org

Contents

1

Toilet as the 'Mainland' of Institution

A Study of Toilets in Tribhuvan University Campus, Kirtipur
Anisha Bhattarai and Kiran Giri

14

The Contents and Relevancy of Social Studies and Life Skills Education

Shak Bahadur Budhathoki

26

Groupism in Dalit Lived Experience

Steve Folmar

42

'Cross-border Nationalism' and Emerging Transnational Identity

The Rajbanshis of Indo-Nepal-Bangladesh Borderland
Gautam Chandra Roy

56

Apathetic and Impassive

The Nepali State in Crises
Khem Shreesh

84

Participatory Planning in a Federal Setting of Nepal

New Trends of Participation During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Vishnu Tandon

99

Activism of Ethnic Social Movement Organisation for Constitutional Reform

An Analysis of the Tamang Movement in Nepal
Anish Kumar Thokar

123

The Contributors

The Contents and Relevancy of Social Studies and Life Skills Education

SHAK BAHADUR BUDHATHOKI

Introduction

The reform in curriculum and textbooks is a periodic process¹ depending on the changing social, political, economic, cultural, and educational contexts. In line with this, the Government of Nepal (GoN) undertakes such reviews and reforms at regular intervals. The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), National Curriculum Development and Assessment Council chaired by the education minister, and subject specialists have specific roles and responsibilities in the regard.

In 1933 CE, the contents of ‘Social Studies’ were incorporated in Social Sciences, Geography and History in high school curriculum. The National Education Commission of 1955 CE recommended introducing Social Studies as a separate subject. As a result, teaching of Social Studies began in 1960 CE at the primary level and in 2000 CE at the secondary level—that is grades 9 and 10 (Ghimire 2013). In 2021, Social Studies curriculum was implemented incorporating Life Skills Education component for grade 11 for the first time in the history of Nepal’s formal education. The reform in the curriculum points towards several issues: what are the logics of its implementation? What are the debates and contestations and why? What are the contents of the curriculum and what is its relevance in the context of federalism? What is the lesson learned out of these processes? This paper attempts to explore these questions as much as possible.

There exists little research, especially in the context of Nepal, in relation to the curriculum of Social Studies and Life Skills Education. As a newly introduced curriculum, it has implications for the education

1 National Curriculum Framework 2019 points out that as a part of curriculum development process, information and feedback is collected regularly from students, teachers, people’s representatives, parents, school management committee, members of education committee, leaders of civil society, enterprisers, and businesspersons. Based on that process, the curriculum is generally updated annually, modified partially in five years and modified or changed completely in ten years (CDC 2019, 8).

stakeholders—from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to all the way down to schools (teachers, students, and parents) in different ways. This paper looks at the public debate, discussions, and deliberations on how to contextualise and improve Social Studies and Life Skills Education in the best way possible depending on actual contexts. Furthermore, the significance of the research finding will be in the process of implementing a new curriculum in future, including in relation to stakeholders associated in this process. What approach should the government system take while introducing a new curriculum? Additionally, this research will generate some outcomes regarding how to better implement a new curriculum in the formal education system. This way, the research findings will be useful for improving education governance to make it more relevant in ever-changing contexts.

The next section provides methods applied for this paper, followed by preparation and implementation of the curriculum at the national and local levels. Then the contents and relevancy of curriculum and textbook is discussed in the context of federal system in Nepal. At the end, conclusions are drawn based on the research findings.

Methodology

The paper is based on a qualitative content analysis of Social Studies and Life Skills Education introduced in Nepal in 2020, identifying contents relating to Life Skills Education. This way, this research adopts data-driven approach for generating key concepts and categories (Schreier 2012). The contents are critically studied from the perspective of key components of Life Skills Education in light of 10 core life skills as laid down by WHO (Sharma 2012). This paper also evaluates the relevancy of the contents in daily life as well as the classroom pedagogy it envisions.

Based on the findings of content analysis, a case study of two school of Kailali district from Sudurpaschim Province of Nepal was undertaken, including in-depth interviews with three teachers and two students in June 2021, focusing on what was going on at the frontline, what were the challenges, what were its limitations, what aspects need to be reformed and how, etc. Similarly, four individuals who participated in devising the curriculum were also interviewed regarding the processes they followed to come up with this curriculum. The aim of this is to see how relevant the textbook and curriculum is, what were the practical problems during the implementation process, and what lessons we could derive out of this that could be applicable in future in introducing a new curriculum.

The Preparation and Implementation of the Curriculum

GoN introduced National Curriculum Framework 2019 that guides curriculum designing, development, and implementation process. As per the framework, curriculum designing process should entail principles of inclusive education in ‘determining curriculum and contents of all levels’ by ‘addressing diverse learning needs of all kinds of children (children with disability, Dalit, economically poor, girls, indigenous, etc.)’ (CDC 2019, 28-29). Specifically, the focus should be on addressing the needs of marginalised children, including children with special needs—by ‘localizing curriculum’ and ‘making school-routine flexible’ (CDC 2019, 29).

CDC (2019, 31) also states that curriculum, textbook, and other teaching material development process should be participatory involving parents, teachers, and stakeholders. To do this, the institutional capacity of local governments need to be enhanced to make them effective while the teacher should be competent to facilitate in the classroom, taking reference of textbook and maintaining a proper balance between local and national curricula. The role of local governments is to bridge the gap between schools and provincial and federal governments facilitating the implementation process at the ground. There is also an acute need to manage human resources at the local level to look after the tasks relating to curriculum preparation and implementation (CDC 2019, 25).

In 2020, GoN prepared and implemented single-track curriculum for grade 11 and 12, replacing the system of four disciplines where students after passing grade 10 chose Science, Management, Humanities, or Education stream. At the beginning, the curriculum provisioned for compulsory subjects—Nepali, English, and Social Studies in grade 11 and Life Skills in grade 12—and three other elective subjects with one more subject that could be included as an optional subject (CDC 2019, 56). However, later, Social Studies was combined with Life Skills Education and was covered in grade 11 for the year with the plan of its implementation in grade 12 the following year.

As Social Studies and Life Skills Education was introduced for grade 11 as a compulsory subject, debate began to surface around whether to implement it or not, and there were concerns and confusions among the students studying Science subjects because they would also have to study Mathematics. In this context, interest groups played their roles;² the private school

2 The National Curriculum Framework 2019 points out, reflecting past experiences, that the curriculum-making process has been affected by the pressure put forth by certain interest groups. It further adds that Nepal’s curriculum-making process has not been based on the international development that is taking place worldwide and then situating them in the Nepali context about the importance of the subject/curriculum.

operators resisted implementing the new curriculum (The Rising Nepal 2020; The Himalayan Times 2020). Similarly, Nepal Mathematical Society, a professional group, had strong reservations that instead of Social Studies and Life Skills Education, Mathematics should be taught as a compulsory subject while keeping the former as an optional one. It could be overheard in the public sphere that private-school operators obstructed implementing new curriculum because they had already published Mathematics textbook for the academic session based on the previous curriculum. Thus, they had to sell these books. As a result of this business-motivated self-interest, they filed a case at the Supreme Court, which resulted into an interim order on 4 November 2020 halting the implementation of the new curriculum until the final verdict (Ghimire 2020).

The ongoing debates at the national level had serious implications at the frontline—the schools—in the implementation process regarding which subject to implement and which not to. In this context, some schools implemented Mathematics while others taught Social Studies and Life Skills Education at their own discretion. However, the Supreme Court gave a verdict in favour of the government on 12 January 2021 to implement the new curriculum and decide on whether Mathematics is to be incorporated into the curriculum or not in grade 11 (Ghimire 2021; myrepublica.com 2021), clearing a long-running debate in this regard. Based on the verdict, GoN changed its policy slightly that schools or students could choose either Mathematics or Social Studies as an optional subject at their own discretion.

The National Curriculum Framework 2019 states clearly that the power is shared among different layers of government surrounding framing of the curriculum, preparing the textbook, and implementing the curriculum and textbooks at the frontline. It states that the federal government prepares national curriculum framework, provincial governments prepare curriculum and textbook based on the national curriculum framework with required adaptations in their contexts, and local governments prepare local curriculum and textbook. Although local and provincial governments are conferred with powers to produce textbooks and to adapt the national-level curriculum for different subjects, this has been a low priority for them for many reasons.

Further, local governments have been given powers to measure learning outcomes after the implementation of the new curriculum and textbooks. In this context, the extent to which local governments are empowered to undertake such roles and responsibilities brings up several questions. Even if the national curriculum framework seems to be comprehensive as well as liberal in terms of division of power, it has hardly been implemented as

per the spirit of curriculum as framed at the national level. This indicates that there should be institutional support system, human resources, and cooperation at different levels to implement a new curriculum in addition to policy provisions in place.

In general, there exists little cooperation in the implementation process at the local level, specifically, among schools, local governments (education section), and Education Training Centre (ETC) at the provincial level. In the past, while introducing new curriculum, ETC and the District Education Office—the district-level entity to look after overall education sector—used to conduct orientations even if it used to be for a short period of time for teachers or they used to pilot it before rolling it out. But this year, none of these took place³. As a result, schools where curriculum and textbook were introduced were in confusion for a long time.

As Social Studies and Life Skills Education became an optional subject for grades 11 and 12, teachers were needed for teaching the subject. Because there was no arrangement for new teachers, schools were in confusion including how to manage a new teacher's salary while local governments often have other priorities than that of teacher salary.⁴ Therefore, it created financial burden for schools. In addition, as teachers are not given orientation and training, how they deliver in the classroom is also an issue. Moreover, what should be the qualification of a teacher is also an important issue because for teaching grade 10 students; a university graduate in any subject is eligible as per the existing policy. So it needs to be defined in the case of grades 11 and 12 as well so that it becomes clearer. This sort of practical issues makes school authorities confused more than anything else.

As the federal system of governance has been in existence for five years now, the education system has not yet become functional under the new dispensation. Local and provincial governments have not become systemic. This is also because the local and provincial governments have other priorities—especially in constructing physical infrastructure—than on investing on quality of education, such as teacher's salary, their orientation, etc. Additionally, local governments have limited human resource than what is required at the local level. In this way, the local governments have little been effective thus far.

3 Based on an interview with a Head Teacher of one of the case-study schools of Kailali. The school is in a semi-urban area.

4 Although local governments are conferred with powers to look after education sector, they mainly focus on constructing road and other physical infrastructure-related aspects while giving little priority in regards to improving quality of education, managing teacher's quota, framing local curriculum, and so on (Based on an interview with the Head Teacher of a public school from Kailali district on 15 June 2021)

The Contents and Relevancy of the Curriculum and Textbook

In the context of federal system of governance in Nepal since 2015, National Curriculum Framework 2019 has been introduced and it envisages adapting ‘curriculum based on local needs’ by identifying and incorporating teaching-learning areas such as ‘mother tongue, local knowledge, skill, natural resource, historical and cultural aspects’ (CDC 2019, 29). The GoN has attempted to incorporate local contents as well as a separate subject through its policies and plans over the time (CDC 2019). However, it is yet to be effective in this regard as there is lack of local capacity, technical and financial resources, monitoring and curriculum development-related system at the local level (CDC 2019). The framework mentions that while localising curriculum, it is important to take account of the ongoing global contexts and trends and maintain a proper balance between local, national, and global needs with emphasis on global citizenship, digital literacy, leadership, communication and cooperation, problem solving, critical thinking, and so on.

In general, it is agreed that the components of Life Skills Education incorporate 10 core skills, namely self-awareness, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision-making, coping with stress, coping with emotion, problem solving, inter-personal relationships, effective communication skills, and empathy (Sharma 2012). Although Life Skills Education could incorporate much more than the ones as stated above, the ones mentioned above are essential for all anywhere in the world.

The current Social Studies and Life Skills Education curriculum and textbook incorporates the 10 core skills mentioned above. In addition, the conceptual aspects including history and linkages of Social Studies and Life Skills Education are illustrated as broadly as possible. Furthermore, digital skills as well as research skills are covered as Life Skills in the curriculum and the textbooks. In the changing local and global contexts, the contents seem to be relevant for students to cultivate critical citizens as necessary.

The textbook of grade 11 gives an overview on the importance of Social Studies and Life Skills Education as:

The main objective of Social Studies and Life Skills Education is to inculcate children to become a good, patriotic, disciplined, capable and creative citizen. For this, citizen should acquire different kinds of Life Skills education, creative skills including some other subject specific skills. These skills will enable them to live a simple and easy-going life throughout their life-time. (CDC 2020, 9)

The statement above points out that Life Skills Education is directly related

with citizen's life—how to acquire skills that enable them to live successfully in the changing social, political, and cultural contexts. In fact, the goal of any education system should be preparing citizens who understand themselves and the society they live in. Although it is hard to predict how will the current Life Skills Education Curriculum affect students' life, the objective as set forth is relevant and praiseworthy.

The other content as included in the curriculum involves digital literacy as:

Digital literacy involves both knowledge and skills on information and communication technology. In the present scientific age, information and communication technology is being used. So, in order to be successful in any sector, it is necessary to have digital literacy. Therefore, every individual should acquire such knowledge and skills. (CDC 2020, 11)

The emphasis on digital literacy appears to be relevant, especially in the context of global pandemic. Generally, it is accepted that knowledge and skills relating to digital literacy has become necessary in the present global contexts for individuals as well as society. However, inculcating such skills and knowledge depends on classroom pedagogy—if we make it more practical, then it is likely to cultivate such skills and knowledge in students as envisaged in the curriculum and textbooks.

The textbook for grade 12 has a unit (pages 9 to 46) that introduces social science research as life skills education. The sub-topics covered are introduction to research, structure of research proposal, issues to be considered while citing previous research, research methods, data collection, interpretation and analysis, use of MS Excel for processing and analysing data, and so on (CDC 2021). In fact, the contents as incorporated intend to orient students to inculcate critical and creative thinking skills to generate new knowledge that is necessary in the society. This also fills the gap in Nepal's education system that such skills and knowledge is somehow missing as rote-learning of theories continues to take place for a long time. Therefore, this kind of skills needs to be inculcated in Nepali citizens as it is likely to resolve many challenges rampant in our society. In this sense, it is commendable that our textbook incorporates such issues in the curriculum and textbook.

The curriculum and textbook incorporate 10 core contents of Life Skills Education—grade 11 textbook has five and the other five are in the textbook of grade 12. The 10 core skills—decisionmaking, problem solving, communication, stress management, and inter-personal skills are included in grade 11, and critical and creative thinking skills, empathy, self-awareness, and emotion management are included in grade 12. While going through the

contents, it is striking that some of them are presented in conversational manner, others in the form of monologues, and remaining ones in the form of plain contexts (concept or introduction and further details). This sort of presentation makes it readable and interesting. And most of the contents are easy to read and suit different academic-level of students.

It is observed that the curriculum and the textbooks could be made more relevant by adjusting contents as per the academic level of students. While talking to some head teachers, they pointed out that some contents/topics are too simple for grade 11 students. Similarly, there are instructions for some topics asking students and teachers to go to certain websites and explore more about that specific topic/contents. However, it could be difficult to do so for schools which does not have much resources including access to the internet.⁵ In Nepal, there are schools which have different contexts as they are in different parts of the country with different social, political, historical, and cultural contexts.

As per the views of some of the students, they perceived that most contents are relevant as they are about our society and how to properly conduct ourselves in our social context. They also said that more topics could be included such as child/early marriage, violence against women, and how to defend oneself, and so on.⁶ They pointed out that imparting such knowledge could potentially be better for them in their day-to-day life to tackle with difficulties and so on. They also think that it could be possible to add more contents about various geographies/locations of the country that could enable them to understand about their locations, their potentials, and options in future. According to Tyler (1949), curriculum should incorporate students' interests and make them understand and broaden their horizons. In fact, this aspect needs to be incorporated in the context of Nepal as well for making teaching and learning process relevant and effective.

Along with contents, there are several factors that are vital for the effective implementation of curriculum. One of them is classroom pedagogy. CDC (2019, 15) points out:

The effectiveness of curriculum depends on its implementation. The teaching and learning process should be practical and effective to realize learning outcomes as included in the curriculum. School and classroom environment and activities are crucial to effectively implement curriculum.

5 Based on an interview with a head teacher-cum-Social Studies and Life Skills Education teacher of a public school in Kailali district.

6 Based on an interview with a student of grade 11 studying in a public school of Kailali district.

It is generally accepted that classroom process plays key role for an effective implementation of curriculum and improving learning outcomes. Similarly, school as well as classroom environment is vital for the purpose. Therefore, it is important that we work with all the factors to realise the goal of a curriculum.

In the recent years, there has been a trend of student-centric teaching methods wherein teachers facilitate providing learning opportunities to students on their own. The characteristics of student-centric teaching method involves group work, project work, presentation, discussion, and so on. However, in Nepali schools, 'group work, community work, project work, etc. have not received as much attention as needed in the classroom for a number of reasons. Similarly, the classroom environment has been focused more on teaching than on learning' (CDC 2019, 16). Therefore, the challenge is how to correct this ongoing trend of teaching and learning process in Nepal's education system.

One of the steps towards making teaching and learning student-centric is to prepare and implement curriculum and textbook in line with that objective. The recently introduced curriculum and textbooks has some contents that are suitable for activity-based teaching and learning. While talking with teachers, they point out that as there are many activities in the textbooks and curriculum, it could not be possible to do that all in the classroom.⁷ As a result of Covid-19, teachers and students had less time than in normal times and this has prevented them for giving more time as needed. In contrast, students point out that there could have been more practical activities as directed in the textbook and curriculum. They cite that there are topics regarding website, social media, etc., which could have been practical to make teaching and learning more relevant and effective.⁸

Some of the units in the textbook are presented in conversational manner, which is likely to make teaching and learning fun. The texts are also in monologue format that suits the topics/lessons presented. Similarly, there are activities after the texts which ask students to do practically what has been studied and the focus is on relating those exercises and lessons in their day-to-day life and so on. There are also practical exercises, project work, and case studies that follow discussion. Based on what has been stated above, the current textbook intends to make teaching and learning activity based and practical. Therefore, the issue is to what extent teaching and learning goes on in the classroom as intended depends on a whole range of other issues such as school and classroom environment, school

7 Based on an interview with a Social Studies and Life Skills Education teacher.

8 Based on an interview with a student of grade 11 studying in a public school of Kailali district.

governance, teacher quality, and so on.

It is envisioned that the evaluation methods for Social Studies and Life Skills Education would be both formative and summative—75 and 25 per cent respectively. In Nepal, this has been applied in other subjects as well, and we have our own experience in this regard for more than a decade. The experience is that it has been implemented in a variety of ways; some schools have implemented it properly following due measures while others have little done so (Budhathoki 2017). Similarly, continuous assessment system is applied up to grade 7, which is not implemented effectively as there is misunderstanding about it. In Nepal, evaluation system is little linked with students' learning process as such (Budhathoki 2018). In this way, Nepal's practice of student evaluation process has not been very effective (CDC 2019).

CDC (2019, 21-22) summarises about how teaching–learning and evaluation process takes place in Nepal's education sector as:

It is often pointed out in Nepal that existing evaluation methods have little been effective and teaching–learning has hardly been a part of facilitation. In schools, from grade 1 to 7, CAS (continuous assessment system) has not been implemented effectively. Similarly, from grade 8 to 12, it is not established that evaluation is for learning by using formative evaluation approach as much as possible. It is found that evaluation is practiced from the point of view of examination. Homework, classwork, extra-curricular activity, group work, etc. has not much been included in evaluation process.

The statement above shows that although there is new policy provision in place, it is yet to be implemented effectively. Thus, the effective implementation aspect is missing therein that needs to be addressed properly to fill the gap.

The aim of the curriculum and textbook is to inculcate essential human values in modern citizens. Any education system should be concerned on making people conscious and well-aware of various ongoing facts and factors in the world. To be able to fulfil one's roles and responsibilities in the modern world as an active citizen, human beings need to possess soft as well as hard skills. And education system should not only inculcate knowledge but also practical skills as needed in day-to-day life.

Conclusion

The implementation process of Social Studies and Life Skills Education did not go smoothly as it used to for other subjects in the past partly because

federal system of governance is yet to be institutionalised, including inadequate qualified human resource as well as structure especially at the local and provincial level. This is also because of the conflict among interest groups at the centre regarding which subject to be taught as a compulsory subject in grades 11 and 12. Thus, the delay in decision-making process led to confusions at the grassroots.

The provisions in the National Curriculum Framework 2019 regarding designing, implementing, and monitoring curriculum and textbook is comprehensive and flexible to some extent in the context of federalism. It devolves powers to provincial and local levels to prepare curriculum and textbooks and at the same time adapt the national-level curriculum in the local context while also making the process participatory and inclusive. However, the capacity of the provincial and local governments is under scrutiny as well as their competence to do so, and institutional structure to look after the curriculum-related issues has not yet been set up in the provincial and local levels.

In general, the contents as included in the curriculum and textbooks are relevant for students and teachers. However, some contents could be added that is specific to a particular context. In other words, curriculum and textbooks need to be localised as per the local social, political, cultural, and economic aspects. Furthermore, it could add traditional livelihood methods that are still useful and relevant. Doing this will lead to preserving our cultural practices or handing over knowledge for upcoming generation as this should be the goals of education systems.

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