

Karen Valentin. 2005. *Schooled for the Future? Education Policy and Everyday Life among Urban Squatters*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing Inc.

Karen Valentin's *Schooled for the Future? Education Policy and Everyday Life among Urban Squatters* is an updated and revised version of Valentin's (2001) Ph.D. dissertation, 'The Paradox of Schooling: the Possibilities of Formal Education for Squatter Families in Kathmandu, Nepal.' In general, the book is an outcome of Valentin's long-term interest in Nepal, and personal attraction towards diversity and complexity of capital city, Kathmandu. For Valentin, Kathmandu appears to be the city, profoundly and pervasively marked by social differences, contradictions and tensions. In particular, the book has been the upshot of research, vividly influenced by the author's personal experience and observation of the social situation of urban poor section of Kathmandu, namely the 'squatters,' who are constantly confronted with the socioeconomic tensions by virtue of their illegal landholding position.

The book, basically, addresses the experiences and anticipations of formal education among economically disadvantaged-cum-socially stigmatized squatter families of Ramaghat, Kathmandu vis-à-vis sociopolitical and historical context. In doing so, the book outlines the complex and dynamic interplay between the state, educational institutions, process of social differentiation and the everyday life

experiences of urban squatters. Moreover, the book entails the subjective experiences of the squatter families (including both adults and children) regarding the ambivalences of the modern schooling system of contemporary Nepal. The book, for the most part, centers around two key paradoxes immanent in modern schooling system. First, despite well-intentioned and promising goal of national project of mass schooling, schools continue to cater to the production and reproduction of social inequalities by consolidating existing class division and, producing a category of unschooled people. Second, whilst families assign a great significance to the economic and symbolic value of schooling, they take schooling of their children as a threat concurrently. To explicate these two key paradoxes of modern schooling system and the complex social processes, emerging from the empirical problems, the book engages with three major theoretical positions throughout the study. These theoretical positions include Bruce Fuller's theories of mass schooling and nation building; Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's theories of role of schooling in social and cultural reproduction; and, Bradley Levinson and Dorothy Holland's theories of cultural production of the educated person.

Taking *critical perspective on policy* into account, Valentin anatomizes the strategies indorsed by the state in the nation-building process, in which schooling is an integral part. While concentrating on the policy initiatives, the book focuses upon the interconnectedness between the policy initiatives of the state and the everyday life experiences of the squatters within the ambit of schooling. Based upon rich ethnographic details and author's critical reflexivity, the book draws attention to how social actors buy into and conceive of national and global projects of schooling. Finally, the book provides an overarching framework for construing the paradoxes inherent within the modern education system in contemporary Nepal.

Overall, the book is very moderate in size comprising merely 210 pages. It consists of six major chapters, besides 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion.' Almost all the chapters of the book are imbued with ethnographic details to facilitate readers with deep understanding of the subject of inquiry. In brief, chapter one maps out the conceptual clarification of categories of social differentiation, which constitute the most significant aspect of author's argument on modern schooling system throughout the study. Valentin takes up her analysis of these categories of social differentiation against the backdrop of historical, global, national and local context. The chapter also includes author's ethnographic account and reflexivity of encountering squatters of Ramaghat and, her

decision to research into this area. Chapter two seeks to elaborate the political construction of education and the role of schooling in the nation building process. The chapter locates modern schooling system in a historical context and elucidates how changing political regimes have impinged significantly on the educational policies of the country from the very beginning to the emergence of mass schooling system in Nepal.

Regarding chapter three, author documents different forms of modern formal schools in Nepal and underscores the complex hierarchical relationship embedded within them. Valentin contends that the integrative ideal of modern schooling takes the form of homogenizing strategies, attempting to standardize school practices as manifested in standardized uniform and time schedule. Although these strategies pledge to embrace all children, nonetheless, they ultimately fail to foster social inclusion, since access to schooling in Nepal is inevitably associated with the families' access to economic capital. Consequently, the children from the squatter settlement, who lack both economic and cultural capital, undergo constant social tensions.

In chapter four, Valentin presents a comprehensive picture of the life condition of squatters of Ramaghat. The author charts out major structural constraints of squatter settlement and their concomitant impact upon squatters' everyday life experiences vis-à-vis schooling. Drawing upon detailed case studies, Valentin predicates two reasons why parents of squatter settlement are desperate to school their children. First, parents see schooling as a key to expunge their stigmatized position as squatters. Second, parents see schooling as a path to their children's better future. Nevertheless, given, the marginalized socioeconomic condition and stigmatized identity as squatters, squatter children perceive school not merely as an opportunity but a big challenge. Chapter five focuses upon the coalescing global and national discourses on formal education and their ramifications on the changing perceptions and expectations of schooling. Valentin, in the chapter argues how social actors, despite structural constraints, expropriate the notion of equality maintained by the modern forms of education leading to a new form of social orientation and identification. The author also suggests how under the influence of international acts and declarations, the notion of education has been re-conceptualized and redefined as a fundamental right of all children rather than the privilege of few.

Chapter six delineates on what it actually means to be a schooled person and how the "schooled" identity contributes to the transforming worldviews of young pupils. Based on ethnographic accounts, the chapter

focuses on how children and young people of Ramaghat transgress bounds of existing caste and generational relations by incorporating national and global discourses on education into their everyday social practices. The author concludes the book with the focus on two key paradoxes of schooling viz., (a) The national project of schooling: eliminating or creating social differences? (b) School children – an asset or a threat to the family? (see pp. 186–191). The author maintains modern education to be the catalyst of social change. However, she also warns that oblivious of nuanced and contextual reality of marginalized group, educational progress can never translate into reality notwithstanding state’s well-intentioned goal of providing “education for all.”

Valentin’s book undoubtedly, has so much to offer to the readers. The book offers readers with fully-fledged ethnographic details and in-depth insight into the schooling experiences of urban squatters of Kathmandu vis-à-vis local, national and global context. Notwithstanding the fact, my evaluation of the book does demonstrate some of the shortcomings of Valentin’s work, at both the conceptual and theoretical level.

At the conceptual level, the major shortcoming of the book lies in Valentin’s dealing with the basic concepts viz., “the categories of social differentiation.” Throughout the book, it is actually very surprising to observe the author’s lack of attention to the fundamental category of social differentiation viz., “gender difference.” Gender as a category of social differentiation has been a topic of less prominence in the author’s observation of the educational expectations of squatter families. In fact, Valentin rarely mentions about the interconnectedness between the changing educational policy initiatives and the participation of women in modern formal education. In a similar vein, within the squatter families, the author undermines the significant role that “gender difference” could play in the process of selecting and sorting out children, especially during lack of economic capital for schooling. Although the author might have deliberately opted out gender as a category of social differentiation in the study, however, with the “gender” as an unused category, the book appears to be less appealing from the gender perspective.

At the theoretical level, by overstating critical-structural approach to schooling, Valentin to some extent eschews significant perspectives (for e.g. utilitarian perspective) towards the analysis of modern schooling system in contemporary Nepal. Valentin portrays modern formal school as the most powerful state institution that privileges certain forms of symbolic capital and subsequently symbolic violence, as manifested in the pedagogic or school practices. By purporting formal school as

legitimate state institution of producing educated person, Valentin poses a complacent image of an educated person, who is nothing more than a passive recipient of a culture that represents structure of domination and mediocrity. “Since there is no account of agency but only abstract and invisible power relations which nevertheless determine reproduction: the theory of symbolic violence assumes a mechanistic and one-dimensional character” (Lakomski 1984: 153). On the other hand, Valentin’s overemphasis upon the oxymoronic nature of the formal schooling and, the structural determination of social actors leave meager space for further explanation to how a transformative school system can be developed at all.

Besides, Valentin also downplays the multidimensional outcomes of schooling, based upon which squatter families assign importance to different forms of capital. Following a similar trajectory of Bourdieu and Passeron’s theory of cultural reproduction, Valentin attributes economic and symbolic value to squatter families’ desire to school their children. Gartman (1991) argues that it is important to consider multi-dimension of resources to understand inequalities in different domains of life including education. Differences in the children’s subject choice and the field of study children enroll in, manifest multidimensionality of resources. Hereby, Gartman suggests technical and communicative (ability to analyze things from different angles) resources, in addition to cultural and economic capital. Gartman posits that in a technological world, students graduated from technical field are more prone to getting jobs faster than the people who lack technical resources in education.

Finally, despite some shortcomings, Valentin’s work is worth reading for having explored area, previously overlooked by anthropologists outside the education domain. In addition, the author’s attempt to research into the educational experiences of squatter children of urban apartheid space of Kathmandu is itself commendable.

## References

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