Teachers at the Heart of Change

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Abstract

When it comes to affecting education reform, it is teachers who are the heart of change. This article examines the transition towards a new style of teaching and learning in Nepalese secondary education. In particular, it looks at teachers' experiences and identifies five pertinent issues or concerns raised by teachers involved in a project that is currently piloting competence-based education elements and soft skills teaching and learning in ten districts in Nepal. As such, the article aims to draw attention to teacher experiences as a point of departure for implementing educational change. It is vital that these experiences and concerns are heard, understood, and discussed. If they are not properly addressed, it can be difficult to assure that education reform efforts will succeed.

The shift towards competence-based education in Nepal

The transition to competence-based education and the shift in emphasis towards the development of so-called "soft skills" (a.k.a21st century skills, key competences) are fairly recent phenomena for national education systems. However, it is without a doubt the direction in which education all over the world is now headed. Countries are striving to make sure that their young are getting a well-rounded education that prepares them for the future, that they are gaining the skills and knowledge they need in order to succeed. In Finland, the basic education core curricula were updated in December 2014, with a focus on "key competences". In the USA, the Common Core State Standards have been adopted by 45 out of 50 states, outlining the skills and content that children will need in their future lives and careers (CCSSI, 2015). In the latest School Sector Reform Plan, this is the direction that Nepal also has decided to take (MOEN 2009, 2014).

What are these new trends? Competence-based education is an approach that focuses on the learner receiving not only the knowledge, but also the skills and competences they need in order to use that knowledge effectively in society. Consequently, the agency of the learning shifts from being teacher-centred to a more student-centred approach, wherein the focus is not so much on the teaching content but on students meeting learning outcomes and practicing different skills, including soft skills. Soft skills, on the other hand, have been defined in the Nepalese context by the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) to consist of four different skills categories: thinking cooperation, personal and business and innovation. By embedding these in the curriculum, learners will be presented with a range of learning experiences and outcomes that will improve their present and future access to learning, their social interaction, their information and communication abilities and their ability to work collaboratively.

The project in which I work, the TSSP or "soft skills project", works with Nepalese education actors to develop the grade 9-10 curricula, and how it is taught and implemented. Based and embedded into the Ministry of Education system, mainly the National Center for Education Development and the Curriculum Development Center, the project works with curriculum developers, teacher trainers, textbook writers and DEO staff, reaching around 800 teachers and

16 000 secondary students in 80 schools in ten intensive piloting districts all over Nepal (figures from project statistics documents).

Identifying concerns raised by teachers

As a pilot, the TSSP project is slowly uncovering some of the practical and technical challenges and opportunities faced by teachers, schools and education management in the transition towards a competence-based education in Nepal. During the last year, my colleagues and I have had a chance to visit and observe teaching and learning situations in classrooms as well as teacher trainings in different parts of Nepal. On our visits, we monitor the piloting of new kinds of teaching and learning activities as well as teacher development activities.

Teachers often express the following concerns and challenges they have faced in implementing project activities. The concerns identified below relate mainly to group work and the practical elements related to teaching work. Based on my own field notes and experiences, I aim to explore and shed light on the concerns and possibilities that lie beyond them by engaging in a small action research. The ensuing discussion can also serve as a starting point for further discussion in finding solutions together with teachers. Where possible, the solutions teachers involved in the project have come up with are given as examples to show how teachers can themselves address these concerns.

Concern No. 1: "My classes are too big to do group work".

Some teachers assume that it is impossible to conduct group work in a class where there are 50 to over a hundred students. "There are too many students! The students are not able to sit in groups in the classroom!"

While these are valid considerations, which need be addressed, it is important to note that the challenges that are faced are, more often than not, largely logistical or practical. In the project, we have seen 90-student classes engaged in quite successful group work, e.g. a letter-writing lesson for Nepali class, the solar system for science. Using the limited resources at their disposal, teachers have come up with interesting grouping techniques, innovative ways to use classroom space and the surrounding environment, as well as drawing on students as a teaching resource. This means that such issues can usually be solved with a little creativity and imagination on part of the schools, teachers and students.

Practicalities aside, project experiences also show that group work and group divisions can also be great tools for improving learning and classroom management in large classrooms.

The benefits of theses practices are manifold. Firstly, by interspersing group learning techniques in their teaching, the teacher can make the learning environment and the learning experience almost magically more compact and intensive for the individual student. This leads to better student engagement, which research and our project experiences show to improve learning performance and classroom behaviour (Toshalis & Nakkula 2012). Secondly, groups are also the only way students can practice soft skills like collaboration and teamwork skills. Thirdly, this practice also enhances community, responsibility and team spirit within the class. Students can give their group(s) names, they can help and support each other in learning activities,

or they can have different tasks related to practical classroom issues. There can even be fun competitions between teams related to learning or classroom management. Last but not least, group work and divisions are not only good for the students, but they can also make the work smoother for the teacher. They make large classes more manageable, and teachers can use groups or teams to develop how they track student performance and student assessment.

The key to successful group work is successful group division. A key issue lies in how many students there are in his or her group, and who is in that group. Unless the task is to form sports teams, class division into smaller sections (e.g. dividing a class of a 100 into 4 groups of 25), quiz teams or to create a theatre or other big production, groups that are over 8 students are usually useless. My advice is to stick to groups comprising 3-6 or a maximum of 10 students. This cuts down the risk of some students getting sidelined from the work. Also, composition of the groups is key when students are doing group-learning activities. Students need to learn how to work with different kinds of people, just like people need to do in work life. This means mixing girls and boys, different abilities and talents, break up friend groups every once in a while, have random groups, etc.

It is also important to keep group assignments interesting in order to keep the student motivated and engaged. This is something that we have seen some of our teachers struggle with. The thing to remember here is that the assignment does not have to be the same for each group. Assignments or the products of the work should be diverse especially if the idea is for student groups to present things to each other. It is often boring for both the teachers and students to listen to the same work being displayed ten times, and it usually results in decreased student engagement.

Concern No. 2: Group work is too noisy, it distracts others.

If the students are able to work tightly within their own groups, the noise that is created usually means that the students are actually engaged in the activity. A buzzing classroom usually means that learning is occurring. Groups tend to form little bubbles of their own, closing themselves away from the other groups. According to the experiences of many of the teachers in our project, the increased motivation and engagement in learning due to group work has also resulted in less misbehaviour in the classroom.

Of course, if the noise is highly disturbing and students are not able to work, or if the noise level is so big that it is bothering other classes, groups can be asked to quiet down. If the noise results from having too many groups in one space, see if there is an empty class nearby, or use the school grounds creatively. This was a solution that a teacher in Rupandehi took advantage of: she asked four groups to work outside on the schoolyard near the classroom.

Classroom management and behaviour relates to this concern. There seems to be a fear among some teachers that there will be behavioural problems if students are allowed to do things too independently and if they are not sitting silently in their rows with faces pointed forwards. However, teachers and schools involved in our project have reported exactly the opposite. In fact, many teachers in the project have reported that student behaviour has become better and engagement in learning has increased when involved in the new learning activities. Teachers in e.g. Jhapa, Kavre, Rupandehi and Surkhet have told and also shown how they have managed to

employ imaginative group learning activities in ways that really engage students' interest and motivate students to learn and apply what they have learned. These activities have included, for example, letter writing to different local institutions or composing dialogues in English class.

Concern No. 3: "There is not enough time to cover the entire curriculum if we incorporate soft skills activities and such learning."

An educator colleague of mine calculated once that on average there are 1-2 learning outcomes per week in each subject per year. With good planning, covering the entire curriculum is usually completely doable. Within units and lessons, a learning outcome or a combination of learning outcomes, can be stretched across more than one lesson or across a unit, incorporating both lectures and practical work such as group work or projects.

A key question that the teacher needs to remember is that merely covering the curriculum in class is not enough The objective is to have children actually learn what is defined in the curriculum – not just "cover it" or "present it once". Once a new issue is covered, students have a much better of chance of understanding and remembering what they have learned if they have practiced and applied it, or otherwise been engaged in the learning actively. In this way, learning outcomes are completely tied and bound to learning activities. In addition, by making learning more fun, students often retain more from the learning activity if they feel they are challenged and they are having fun. In the end, incorporating group work and practical work that involves applying the content really helps students perform better in their future lives and in standardized exams such as SLCs. A teaching professor in America, Richard Felder, talks about this on a video, where he reflects the teaching he did during a lecture:

What I think kept them with me throughout that class, was that they had something to do periodically, not just sit and watch me and listen to me. I covered what I wanted to cover in that class, even with the active learning exercises. And over the course of the semester, I covered the entire syllabus: every bit that I had originally planned to cover… Contrary to most professors' fears when they first hear about active learning methods, that if they do all of those exercises, they will never get through the entire syllabus. But I covered the syllabus in a way that kept most of the students awake for the entire semester, and with me. And in the course of their learning they were learning both the material in the course, and more importantly, I think, how to work together. (Richard Felder in DCIT 2009, 10:00)

A good practice that has been developed in a school in Kavre, is to combine two 45-minute periods into one, effectively making 90 minute lessons for each subject. This allows for students to learn the theory and content before being given ample time to conduct independent or group learning activities related to what they have learned. The school said they have found this practice to be highly beneficial in terms of student engagement and learning performance.

Concern No. 4: "Planning soft skills enhancing lessons takes too much time."

It is true that it often takes a little bit longer to master new planning techniques. Often it would seem that the old way involves simply following the textbook. However, planning is an essential part of teaching, and teachers need to have enough time to plan their work irrespective of the method of teaching. There needs to be enough time per year allocated for teachers to conduct

this activity in order to ensure that the curriculum is covered and that students meet desired learning outcomes.

Furthermore, when it comes to quality teaching, it takes just as long to plan a good lecture-based lesson as it does to plan group work. For a lecture, a teacher has to plan the entire content and how they intend to deliver it so that the students learn it effectively. In group work, teachers need to plan e.g. a) how the activity will address learning outcomes, b) what the learning tasks will be and how they are implemented, c) the introduction and instructions and d) presentation method. This leaves the bulk of the learning work and content learning to be done by students themselves, which, in turn, leaves the teacher free to facilitate, observe and assist and may be even engage in their own planning or assessment work. Like one teacher in Dhanusha said during a break of one of our teacher trainings, she found that group work is generally more energy sparing for the teacher as then he or she "doesn't have to talk all the time".

While thorough planning can seem very time-consuming, it is worth remembering that plans can be re-used. This can save time in the long run, especially as the teacher gains more working years under their belts. The golden rule here is that once a learning activity has been planned, it is easily implemented again as long as the teacher keeps a record of lesson plans and activities. Be they group work activities, individual student projects or lectures, teachers can draw on them in following years, occasionally modifying and adding on. In addition, a written record allows the teacher to share ideas and practices with colleagues, devise lessons in advance for substitute teachers, etc., and keep the headmaster in the know of what kind of teaching is going on.

Concern No. 5: "My students are unable to do these kinds of activities."

This is actually where this concern crosses paths with the third concern (planning lessons takes too much time). Based on my observations, some teachers plan their active learning activities in a way in which they plan out the entire thinking and learning path the teacher thinks the student will take. Often teachers have designed very detailed and controlled teaching activities for their soft skills enhancing lesson plans. The teacher guides the entire process minutely guiding the student's thinking process. In addition to this being time-consuming, it also defeats the point of competence-based education and soft skills learning, which are supposed to be student-centred. When the agency of learning is shifted to the learner, a key part of the learning process is getting students thinking and learning independently.

This usually involves giving students a task, a project or a problem or mystery to solve with the help of a few tools, and letting them discover how solve it, what steps to take in solving it. Making mistakes, trialling and making errors is a key part of this. Instead of trying to stop these from happening, teachers need to guide the process by asking guiding questions and providing assistance, as well as letting students learn from their mistakes. An important part of this is e.g. open-ended questions, using cues (showing the part where the student went wrong) or prompts (prompting students to apply the same rules to every bit).

The following example, taken from a posting by a teacher to the Edutopia website for teachers, illustrates this point:

"Take a typical situation of a math problem involving money. A student is unable to determine the percentage that he or she should be getting, and is struggling with multiplication of decimals… As educators, we… show him or her how to do it, pat ourselves on the back… In fact, we didn't save that student's day, we may have made no difference at all. Feedback that simply shows a child how to do something won't cause that child to think. He or she will merely learn to replicate what the teacher did without truly "getting" the concept being taught." (Miller 2015)

Students need to be given a chance to be resourceful, be challenged, and to practice. Learning is also discovery, trial and error, and thinking about what needs to be done next. When they leave school, they will not have a lesson plan or a teacher to guide their thinking process. Learning to think, ask the right questions, plan work and solve problems independently are key skills students need to practice.

Conclusion

Throughout the world, changes are occurring in classrooms in the interaction between the teacher and student and how student performance is assessed. This articles does by no means represent an exhaustive list of teacher's concerns. However, it can serve as a starting point for further work and discussion in finding solutions together with teachers. Clearly, there are many practical and technical aspects that need to be ironed out at school-level when it comes to implementing educational changes.. Also, there are undeniably big, underlying challenges, like huge classrooms, that Nepal needs to work on, and which have an affect on teachers' work.

However, a wider issue that also underpins all the concerns mentioned above is fear of the new or unknown. Fear of the new is endemic to most (educational) change. In the US, a school started implementing a new practice. This was a free period, where students were allowed to do anything they wanted to do – be it extra support with a subject, hobbies, sports, etc. According to the headmaster, this was not easy at first:

"Logistically, giving fourth, fifth and sixth grade students the ability to transition between classes on campus was "scary" at first, says Young."(Humboldt Elementary, 2015)

Indeed, the term "scary" from the above quote resonates also in the concerns felt by many teachers in the TSSP pilot project. My personal hypothesis is that the brunt of this fear comes from the change in the power paradigm within teaching and learning within schools. With student-centred learning, the student becomes the main agent in learning, not the teacher. Consequently, this means that students need to be given more power, responsibility, agency and independence over their own learning. This constitutes a remarkable change. This means teachers need to step back and relinquish control over the learning and thinking processes to the students, and this can be scary, especially when many teachers and educationalists themselves have never experienced such an education themselves.

What are possible solutions to overcoming teacher concerns? In the example above from the US, the headmaster, Young, faced initial pushback from teachers concerned about losing valuable instruction time in their already-busy schedules due to the free period. According to him, keeping a close eye on data and sharing the measurable gains in student achievement is what eventually got everyone on board with the program and what it took to overcome resistance to

the change. Likewise, teachers in Nepal need to be shown that student-centred learning pays off in the Nepalese context, and that the challenges are not always insurmountable.

Furthermore, teachers will need to be heard and involved in the current and future reform processes. If not, this will affect the implementation of competence-based education at the very heart of education: planning and carrying out learning activities. Any concerns or fears teachers may have will need to be tackled as an integral part the reform through inclusive change management. This means that the assumptions, the realities and the expectations felt and described by teachers and schools at the grassroots need to be thoroughly examined, integrated and addressed in any upcoming reform efforts aiming to help Nepal transition to competence-based education – be it curriculum development, teacher education, teacher in-service training, textbooks, or classroom support within districts.

Lastly, we need to find ways to train and communicate teachers that resonate with their realities and their experiences, and which address their fears and anxieties. It is only in this way that we can hope to transpire true change in education in Nepal.

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