Reimagining Education: Policy Innovation for Nepal's Public Schools

Ajit Bhatta, Social Lab

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I. Background

For several decades, Nepalese public schools have faced challenges to the perception and status quo that they are the least valued and most underwhelming institutions in the academic landscape in Nepal. The situation is even debilerating when it comes to Remote Nepal. Nepal's public Education system is often affected by a lack of resources in remote areas, poor quality of education, inadequate teacher training, and significant disparities in access between urban and rural areas, as well as across different socio-economic groups (1). It may seem that the government has been spending countless hours, efforts, and investment on training the teachers, but most of them are limited to the urban locations.

While the debate between private and public schools has been carried out for a long time, it's not unusual for the general public to have a negative impression of public schools when they are frequently making the headlines on daily news (2).

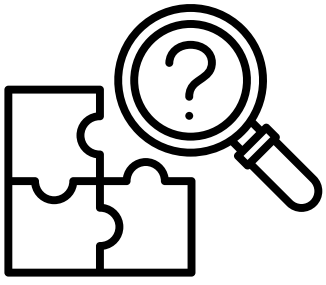
The effectiveness of a school is largely determined by the quality of teaching, along with the skills, motivation, and dedication of its teachers (UNESCO, 2008) (3). Recently, some public schools have begun driving change with creative approaches to improve student retention and attract parents' attention, but the majority of public schools remain overlooked.

Local government interventions, such as the 'Book Free Friday' initiative by Kathmandu Metropolitan City, have led to notable changes in the public education system, particularly within Kathmandu. The initiative has some remarkable effects, particularly among the students in terms of their motivation to go to school and focus on a creative learning approach. But the large chunk of the public education system remains overlooked in terms of quality, delivery, and efficiency.

1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379389092_Study_and_Analysis_of_Education_System_in_Nepal_and_Its_Challenges_Along_with_Its_Solution
2. https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepal-s-worsening-public-education-crisis
3. https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/teaching-and-learning-achieving-quality-for-all-gmr-2013-2014-en.pdf
4. https://kathmandupost.com/kathmandu/2023/04/27/textbook-free-friday-initiative-welcomed-but-also-doubted

II. Problems

The current educational policies in Nepal face significant challenges due to insufficient financial and technical support for local governments, particularly in rural areas. Despite efforts to promote digital learning through ICT integration, many schools lack the necessary infrastructure, such as reliable electricity and internet access. Additionally, the monitoring and evaluation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) are weak, limiting their effectiveness in driving meaningful educational reforms (5). These gaps hinder the overall quality and equity of education, especially in underserved regions.



Beyond these problems, there are important issues that also need to be discussed, including insufficient teacher training, lack of inclusive education practices, and a disparity in resources between urban and rural schools. There's limited community involvement in school governance, weak integration of vocational and technical education, and inadequate support for marginalized groups. These gaps contribute to educational inequality and hinder the system's ability to meet diverse student needs effectively.

From a ground-level perspective, public schools in semi-remote and remote areas of Nepal face significant disadvantages. The issues go beyond ICT integration, inclusivity, and technical education; there is a lack of engaging content and intrinsic motivation for students to attend school regularly. This lack of engagement is often overlooked in the meantime, but can lead to high dropout rates and low enrollment in the long run. Incorporating ICT and other state-of-the-art facilities may look intriguing for the students. But the fundamentals that need to be restructured and engineered are still a far cry.

III. Case Studies

The "Basic Education Curriculum Reform" introduced in China in 1999 represents a significant shift in educational policy that remains relevant today. This reform emphasizes a move away from a narrow focus on knowledge transmission towards encouraging students to learn how to learn and fostering positive attitudes. It advocates for a more balanced, integrated curriculum that meets the diverse needs of students, replacing outdated and complex content with essential knowledge and skills for lifelong learning.

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5. https://nepjol.info/index.php/rnjds/article/view/58921/43982

The reform also encourages a shift from passive, rote learning to active, problem-solving approaches that enhance students' abilities in information processing, problem-solving, and cooperative learning. Furthermore, curriculum evaluation now aims to promote student growth, teacher development, and instructional improvement, rather than simply focusing on selection. Finally, the reform calls for decentralizing curriculum control, promoting collaboration between the government, local authorities, and schools to ensure the curriculum is relevant to local contexts (6).

The case of integrated learning system in Estonia is another great example of how policy innovation in public schooling can bridge educational inequality gap (7). Since 2010-11, Estonia's curriculum for primary and lower secondary schools has focused on integrated learning to develop cross-curricular skills. This includes projects, interdisciplinary courses (e.g., IT, career education), and extracurricular activities (e.g., cultural identity, first-aid). Lower secondary students are also required to complete a creative project that integrates subjects or addresses cross-curricular themes.

Finland's education system prioritizes student well-being and learning over standardized testing, offering a global model for success. Compulsory education, extended to 18 years in 2012, ensures access and equality. Finnish teachers undergo a rigorous five-year master's program, allowing them autonomy in teaching methods, which promotes respect and quality education. The curriculum focuses on interdisciplinary learning, critical thinking, and mental well-being with anti-bullying policies. Finland's approach fosters academic and personal growth, offering equal opportunities for all students and emphasizing children's rights, play, and holistic development (8).

After School Program (ASP) introduced by public schools in Korea and Japan is also a great example to refer. An After School Program (ASP) is a student-centered initiative designed to support learning and development outside the regular school curriculum. Offered after school hours and typically at locations away from the school site, ASPs aim to promote the academic, social, emotional, and physical growth of children and youth. These programs are intentionally structured and implemented based on pedagogical and developmental principles to aid in the overall development of participants (9).

Udeskole or Outdoor Learning approach introduced by Scandavian Countries is one-to-watch. Udeskole, aimed at children aged 7-16, involves regular educational activities outside of school, such as weekly or bi-weekly lessons in natural and cultural settings like forests, parks, farms, and museums. This approach connects learning with the local community, encouraging students to explore their environment, history, and local culture. For example, a geography teacher might have students photograph local landmarks and study their history, or a teacher might incorporate nature into math lessons by measuring trees. Udeskole often uses hands-on, cross-disciplinary activities like outdoor play combined with subjects such as mathematics, languages, and history (10). This method helps students develop a sense of community and connection with their local environment while fostering teamwork and practical skills through collaborative tasks like cooking or building.

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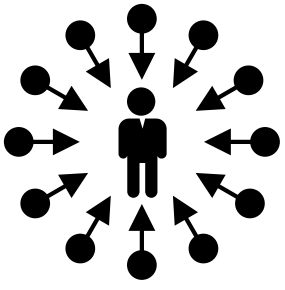
6. https://journals.openedition.org/ries/3846
7. https://worldclasslearningsystems.com/how-estonia-is-building-a-world-class-learning-system/
8. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/09/10-reasons-why-finlands-education-system-is-the-best-in-the-world/
9. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1251001.pdf
10. https://www.ucviden.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/107142984/Denmark.pdf

IV. Policy Options and Opportunities

Theme	*Intervention*	*Description*
Curriculum Reform for Relevance and Engagement	Reform the national curriculum to focus on skills-based learning, critical thinking, and creativity rather than rote memorization	Competency-Based Education should focus on problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking, while integrating local context and promoting STEAM to enhance relevance and engagement.
Promoting Experiential and Simulative Learning	Developing Customized Simulative Experential Curriculum	Implement customized, simulation-based learning in public schools, tailored to local geography and community, to enhance students' critical thinking in areas like Financial Literacy, Farming, Entrepreneurship, and Environmental Awareness.
Strengthen Local Government Capacity in Educational Planning	Strengthen local government capacity to manage education resources in rural and remote areas.	Local authorities should receive technical support to create community-specific solutions. In Nepalese public schools, positive reinforcement programs, with rewards for attendance and progress, can boost student engagement and attendance.
SMART Investment in Education	Local governments should prioritize SMART investments to effectively address the specific educational needs of their communities.	SMART investment is crucial for driving innovation in Nepal's public education. Funding should address each community's specific needs, such as prioritizing foundational needs over ICT in areas lacking electricity or internet.
Launching Project Based Learning (PBL)	Promoting PBL method across the community or public schools in Nepal to engage the local students and sensitize them with communal issues	Introduce Project-Based Learning (PBL) in public schools to engage students in solving real-life local issues through hands-on projects that blend academics with practical skills like problem-solving, communication, and teamwork

V. Conclusion

Nepal's public education system stands at a critical crossroads. For decades, it has been marred by systemic inefficiencies, urban-rural disparities, and a lack of contextual relevance—particularly in remote areas where basic infrastructure and engaging learning opportunities remain scarce. While there have been isolated efforts and promising initiatives like 'Book Free Friday,' the broader landscape still demands urgent, holistic reform.



The need of the hour is a bold reimagining of how education is delivered, governed, and experienced in Nepal. Global examples—from Finland's student-centered pedagogy to Estonia's integrated curriculum, and from China's learner-focused reforms to Korea and Japan's After School Programs—offer inspiring blueprints that Nepal can adapt, not adopt. The Scandinavian Udeskole model shows how learning can be connected with nature and community, something that resonates deeply with Nepal's geography and cultural richness.

To move forward, Nepal must prioritize SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely) investments that are tailored to the actual needs of each community, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all solutions. Policies must empower local governments with the resources, training, and autonomy to design context-specific interventions. Innovative, low-cost, and accessible learning models—like outdoor education, simulation-based learning, Project-based learning (PBL) and positive reinforcement strategies—can reignite student curiosity and strengthen community engagement.

Ultimately, reimagining education in Nepal is not about chasing technological trends or replicating foreign systems. It's about grounding education in local realities while drawing inspiration from global successes. It's about putting students at the center, supporting teachers at the grassroots, and ensuring that every child, no matter where they live, has access to meaningful, inclusive, and quality education. Only then can Nepal's public schools evolve from being the weakest link in the academic chain to becoming engines of opportunity and change.