

Service Learning from an Education Perspective in Nepal

Cheng, Ti-Chung

Mr. Brian Skerratt

GEMC 3001 Service Learning/Civil Engagement

June 27, 2014

Abstract

Service learning brings us away from our comfort zones to learn through service. Hoping to emit setbacks from many current service programs, we aimed at designing a long term and efficient service. Nepal is currently poor in infrastructures and living conditions. Thus, hoping to help our targeted village, Tripureswor, I wanted to focus on Education, the key role in improving a nation's living standards. Through interviewing local villagers and NGOs, I gained knowledge on the structure and condition of Education. By reanalyzing observations and acquiring data from International organizations, I concluded that the lack of equality and quality were the two main problems. Gender and ethnic inequality exist within the equality category. Such inequalities are resultant from cultural, religious and historical backgrounds. Quality of both fundamental education and higher education also face challenges under limited resources and providers. Furthermore, lack of incentives and active learning habits were also found to result from society circumstances. By designing a plan that involves villagers and us visitors, we aim to solve such limitations and bring solution to improve the education in rural villages. Finally, discussion of the dilemma of whether we should conduct services to developing countries were held.

Service Learning in Nepal

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”

said Benjamin Franklin. At the site of service learning, we withdraw ourselves from our comfort zones and ideas. Putting our feet in the shoes of the people we serve, observing and rethinking what seems most common to us, rebuilds our vision which allow us to reflect what we do and who we are. Nepal is a land-lock country between China and India. Covered by over 75 percent of mountain, it is a multiethnic, multicultural, multi-religion and multilingual piece of land.¹ Yet, behind Nepal’s beautiful scenery and its mysterious culture, the country was once ruled by monarchy. Civil war has taken place as people of Nepal struggled for a better life; its politics reformed during 1996 to 2006 with the communist party (Maoist) involved. The war ended as Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal was established in 2007.² Over the past decades, the people of Nepal has suffered from poor living condition. Poverty, high human trafficking, serious environmental issues, chaotic social orders, high malnutrition in children hid among neighborhoods. The international community decided to reach in and help the country to bring people better living conditions.

Observing volunteering operations currently available, ranging from English

¹ “General information.” Embassy of Nepal Copenhagen, Denmark. Accessed June 20, 2014. <http://nepalembassydanmark.com/about-nepal/general-information/>.

² “Nepal votes to end monarchy.” The Cable News Network. December 28, 2007, <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/12/28/nepal.monarchy/index.html?iref=mpstoryview>.

tutoring, medicine practice to environmental improvements, many of those are unstable and do not meet the actual needs of the people they targeted. Many times, relationship between volunteers and service targets have weak bonds as they come and go. Villagers feel lost when these helps leave. Thus we decided to change this phenomenon by cooperating with a Hong Kong non-government organization (NGO) named Dragonfly, which has been focusing on one village, Tripureswor Village, for a long period of time. We planned to present a sustainable and efficient to the community by proposing a long term project that includes planning, designing, operating and evaluating. For this current trip, our goal was to conduct field research, identify problems within the village, design different approaches and then apply suitable projects to the village.³

To me, education is the key element in improving one's living conditions. Not only do statistics from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) find close relation of a higher literacy rate with a lower mortality rate and less underweighted children⁴, history also proves that education is the fastest way to bring new technology and knowledge to people, creating a better nation and living standard. Thus, I focused on fields of education during the service

³ Morningside College, *Episode 1: Morningside in Nepal* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong I • CARE Service Projects Funding Application 2013, 2013).

⁴ UNESCO and UNICEF, *Asian-Pacific End of Decade Notes on Education for All*, 6.

trip at the village.

Understanding Education in Nepal

To understand the education system within Nepal, discussion should place from two perspectives: fundamental education and higher education. Fundamental education includes primary (grade one to five), lower secondary (grade six to eight), secondary (grade nine to ten) and higher secondary school (grade eleven to twelve)⁵. School Leaving Certificate (SLC) is the exam taken at the end of tenth grade, before students graduate from secondary school, . Higher secondary school is taken if the student is pursuing university. There is no compulsory education in Nepal⁶. In Nepal, there are three types of schools: government school, private school and community school⁷. Government school is run by the community committee, such as deciding the principal of the school, with regular funding from the government. These schools allow students to take twelve years of education for free, including textbooks, thus, students would only have to buy uniforms and prepare their daily lunch. Before the eleventh grade, all courses are given in Nepalese⁸. Regardless of free education, education quality is relatively poor compared to private funded schools which provide most courses in English. Community school is a special kind of institution found in

⁵ UNESCO, *World Data on Education VII Ed. 2010/11*, 9-11.

⁶ UNESCO, *Nepal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes*, 1.

⁷ See note 5.

⁸ Representative from Achane Higher Secondary School, interview by Morningside students, May 19, 2014

mostly rural areas in Nepal by communities without regular government funding.

Most of these community schools are funded by international organizations or private organizations and were later recognized within government school system (though the government still does not fund the schools). Higher Education in Nepal includes Universities and Vocational training schools. University in Nepal is the same as the rest of the world. Yet, a lack of vocational institutions has long existed in Nepal. .

Though the number of private training institutions has grown from 3 in 1991 to 450 in 2011⁹, the quality is unstable and providers are not consistent.¹⁰

Observation and Interview at Tripureswor Village

During the stay at the village, we visited Achane Higher Secondary School, a government school. It provides education from nursery level to grade twelve, with over 500 students and 24 teachers. During the interview with the staff at the school, we noticed that the school has received donations of computers, printer, solar panels and even a wireless internet system. The teachers think that the challenges the school faces include the lack of compound preventing animals from entering the campus, students unable to complete homework and revises due to heavy house chores and finally the insufficient trainings for the teachers.¹¹ The campus is poor in infrastructure including lack of water supplies. We also visited Janajyoti Lower

⁹ ADB, *Innovative Strategies in Technical and Vocational Education and Training*, xii.

¹⁰ Ibid., 13, 27, 33-34

¹¹ See note 8.

Secondary School that already has over 100 years of history. The school has been rebuilt by NGOs and a library was introduced. During our observation, the books on the shelves seemed new. The teachers claim that they will let older students read books once in a while.

Interviewing the villagers, I found out that the incentives for education were rather low. Jobs for government vacancies and chances to serve the military are not opened to public.¹² Besides farming, Nepalese people can only survive on selling services, or tourism. Over the past years, the rapid change of education policy has also brought chaos to education. Interviewing a representative from United Missions Nepal (UMN) we understood that many NGOs are currently doing a great job in helping improve the infrastructures and teachers' training. However, he told us that the community committees members are mostly uneducated, causing improper decisions made for the school. He also mentioned a high dropout rate in schools.¹³

Studying the statistics

At the village, when several of us discussed about Nepalese education, we concluded a critical question to be answered: "Is Nepal's education just improving, or is there potential problems hidden?" By looking into the statistics and research UNESCO has done, nursery school enrollment rate has increased from about 20% in

¹² Ranjit Lama, in discussion with author, May 17, 2014

¹³ United Missions Nepal (UMN) representative, interviewed by Morningside students, May 21, 2014

2003 to 80% in 2012.¹⁴ Primary school has also increased from 84% in 2003 to 97% in 2012.¹⁵ Secondary school has the enrollment rate of 46% in 2007 and has grown to 60% in 2012.¹⁶ These figures show that education has slowly become a value that Nepalese people recognized. The number of girls, kids in rural area, even with a lower net enrollment rate, shows a growth over the past few years. Overall, the literacy rate has increased from 54% to 66% from 2001 to 2011.¹⁷ All these figures pointed toward a bright side for education in Nepal.

However, when starting to find more data and even comparing it with what we've been seeing in the village, two major issues can be seen: equality for education and quality for education. For fundamental education, there is no doubt that boys receive more education resources than female¹⁸. During our interview with UMN, girls do not usually complete their studies due to early marriage. Furthermore, culture in Nepal do not allow female to rely on families when certain age is reached.¹⁹ Thus, female students drop out of school at a relatively young age. Another inequality issue is caste. Over eighty percent of Nepalese believe in Hinduism, resulting in a strong caste system in the country.²⁰ Even though no evidence has shown that caste system

¹⁴ "Nepal." United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS). Accessed June 20, 2014.

¹⁵ See note 14.

¹⁶ See note 14.

¹⁷ Government of Nepal, "National Population and Housing Census 2011," November 2012, 4.

¹⁸ See note 14.

¹⁹ See note 13.

²⁰ See note 17

causes differentiated treatment to the students directly, data show that the lower castes has lower diploma.²¹ Higher education faces the same issues. Female attendance is much lower than male for universities. As described above, vocational education are mostly provided by private funds that require SLC as appropriate qualification; most female and lower caste students drop out of school before tenth grade, leaving them no training institutions to go.²²

The quality of education is also serious in Nepal's education. Government school for fundamental education has poor quality in infrastructure. Resulting from the mountainous terrain, the government has to build a lot of schools for villagers to go to, causing insufficient resources distributed to each school.²³ Also because of the geography and lack of sufficient transportation and resources, teachers are not often trained.²⁴ Government school provides poor education environment for students. Focusing on vocational education for higher education, mostly funded by external institute, not only is the quality of these trainings unstable according to UNESCO's research, these training providers are not consistent while the government does not have enough ability to take control of these institutes.²⁵ It was also reported that many of these training sessions do not fit the local company's' needs.

²¹ See note 14

²² ADB, *Innovative Strategies in Technical and Vocational Education and Training*, 19.

²³ Mallika Aryal, "Nepal Scores Low on Quality Education," *GlobalIssues*, accessed April 16, 2014, <http://www.globalissues.org/news/2013/07/09/17013>

²⁴ See note 8.

²⁵ ADB, *Innovative Strategies in Technical and Vocational Education and Training*, 33-34.

Identifying the problems

One of the most direct and obvious issue observed is lack of resources. The Nepalese government has been increasing the percentage of GDP spent on education, yet till 2010, Nepal only spends 4.7 percent of their total GDP²⁶ compared to an average of 6.2% for OECD countries.²⁷ Accompanied by the unstable political powers, education policies have been changing rapidly. The caste system and tradition is another defect for education development in Nepal. History shows that the caste system in Nepal was written officially by Jang Bahadur Rana, the founder for the famous Rana dynasty of Nepal, who is a descendant from a higher caste within India. To control and dictate the nation, the Khas people, the higher class including Braham and Chhetri, made Nepali, their native language, as the official language.²⁸ From this, it is simple to explain why caste system lies deep inside the society, why public schools are taught in Nepali, and how education was a tool to conquer instead of solving social issues and create chances for people to improve their lives. Finally, a serious issue in Nepal is the lack of organized and sustainable help from the international community. The lack of professional guidance causes limited knowledge allowed to the people in Nepal. Any people can come to give English lessons for the

²⁶ See note 14.

²⁷ OECD, *Education at a Glance 2013*, 182-186.

²⁸ Wikipedia contributors, "History of Nepal," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, accessed June 27, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=History_of_Nepal&oldid=609877357

kids without proper teaching training, farming techniques might not be useful without expert's inspections and help from the international community might hurt the Nepalese by giving them wrong knowledge.

Suggestions

Understanding that it would be impossible for us to directly change the government, culture and history, we should be thinking of helping the underprivileged people such that they can also own equal opportunities. Thus, many NGOs provide literate courses in rural areas and build medical centers in faraway towns. Yet, these helps might cause negative consequences. During the service trip, I was aware that more and more things are built, donated and funded by external organizations. When an NGO enters a village, it is hard to observe strong motive from the villagers hoping to make the community a better place together, and are instead, "observers" around these NGOs. It seems like many Nepalese villagers has started to depend on outer support instead of finding their own.

To solve this issue, I wanted to integrate community empowerment experiences with travel camps within the village. The process begins by having university student work with local villagers and NGOs to design camp and outdoor activity as a chance to experience life and beauty of rural Nepal. Within the camp, these visitors can experience the beauty of Nepal and the culture. Experience workshops can be held

such as joining the farmers as they harvest, fishing with local kids, learning the making of traditional Nepalese food, and so on. Through the visit, they would be in demand of services and accommodation. These demands will reflect physically by allowing villagers to earn money and thus motivate local villagers to improve their service and skills. To explain more, local villagers might want to learn how to provide better food for these visitors, plant different crops to attract more visitors or design fun experiences and chances to interact with visitors. Instead of passively receiving help, they are highly engaging within this program and actively interacting with people outside of Nepal. The exchange of ideas and culture can be performed and knowledge can be transported through daily communication.

Discussion and Conclusion

Have our project reached our expectation? I believe so. Through hands on observation and interaction, we are directly involved with the community and participating in Nepalese culture, these feelings and experiences cannot be easily translate through words. Throughout the trip, having different people focusing on different aspects, we are able to gain knowledge through each individual's focuses within their topics. Through our discussion, a bigger picture was formed and the relationship between issues were clarified. Problems in Nepal cannot be separated from one and another; health, for example, is related to economics, which is effected

through education that is tightly linked to culture and history. I also see Ranju, our guide in Nepal, listening carefully when all of us share our thoughts on the different topics. This is how people in the village learn by experiencing with us.

However, the most critical dilemma to reexamine is: Is it right to conduct a service? We know that kids have to fall to learn how to stand up. People learn through failure experience and find their best way to prevent the next failure. We, as people from developed countries, have experience of how our country dealt with similar issues before. Thus, when we serve, we tend to apply the method directly to the nation and conduct the plans for them. We might not notice that the method might not be applicable for these people.

Thus, we should start to change our attitude to serving a developing country or to underprivileged people. We should decrease our motives while providing incentives for these people to increase their motivation. By such, we can truly understand what they need and therefore find useful resources for them. Only by this can we perform sustainable and efficient services and help the people we serve.

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