

Globalisation, Neo-liberalism and the Limitations of School Effectiveness Research in Developing Countries: the case of Nepal

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ABSTRACT *This paper considers the nature and implications of the increasingly global school effectiveness research tradition. It argues that such research, by focusing primarily on student cognitive achievement, creates an unnecessarily narrow definition of 'good' schools, and undermines the role of schooling for societal change. This is especially important in developing countries where schooling plays a key role in the process of modernisation. An example from Nepal illustrates the pervasive influence of neo-liberal tendencies in education, and is used as a point of departure for a more ethnographic research agenda that explores schools' aims and processes and the meaning that their various stakeholders attribute to them.*

Introduction

Globalisation not only blurs the national boundaries but also shifts solidarities within and outside the national state. (Torres, 2002, p. 363)

The meaning and impact of globalisation—generally and more specifically within the field of education—is far from settled. Its effects vary across and within countries and institutions. While globalisation is not yet a unified, 'global' phenomenon, a number of characteristics are nevertheless becoming more apparent. New forms of economic organisation favour freer approaches to trade and investment alongside flatter, more responsive workplaces. Political shifts appear to have undermined the sovereignty of nation-states and the autonomy of individuals within them. Culturally, standardisation and homogeneity threaten diversity and difference (Burbules & Torres, 2000). For education, especially formal schooling, a particular version of globalisation is in the ascendancy, with neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies favouring certain approaches to school organisation, management, curriculum, instruction, evaluation and improvement. For some, the 'conservative restoration' in education involves an alliance of interests that aim to deliver efficiency, choice and accountability to

schooling, and to re-establish certain types of state-sanctioned knowledge and values to the processes of teaching and learning. One important agent in this process of transformation has been the upwardly mobile middle class that have appropriated schooling, in all its diverse forms, as an instrument of economic, political and social control (Apple, 1993).

While further analysis is required to determine the precise place of the school effectiveness 'movement' in the restoration of conservatism in education, one can certainly argue that it plays an active and on going role in legitimising certain types of school structures, processes and aims that support the type of conservatism outlined by Apple and others (e.g. Ball, 1994).

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it will explore the dominant approach to school effectiveness research and the ways in which it affects the conduct of schooling in one developing country—Nepal. This example, it is argued, is typical of those states in the process of developing schooling systems with which to support the process of modernisation. Second, having highlighted the limitations of this tradition, the paper will outline a more culturally grounded research agenda that focuses less on ascertaining the relation between specific educational 'inputs' and educational achievement, and more on exploring broader notions both of what it means to be 'schooled' and 'educated', and what 'good' schools might mean in different contexts.

School Effectiveness: some literature

School effectiveness research traces its origins to two major studies of school effects carried out in the USA during the 1960s (Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Jencks *et al.*, 1972). Rather than providing US policy makers with systematic insights with which to shape schooling processes, these studies highlighted the influence of social class as the overwhelmingly dominant factor in educational achievement. A second generation of studies, aimed in part at challenging these findings and the limited role for schools that they implied, concentrated on exploring school factors and their relation to student achievement. In the spirit of the educational reform movement of the 1960s and '70s, much of the motivation for this work was grounded in notions of equality of educational opportunity and social justice, with early definitions of effectiveness blending a mastery of skills with considerations of equity (e.g. Edmonds, 1979). Since this time, conceptions of effectiveness have broadened from pure outcomes to an evaluation of progress. For Stoll and Fink (1999) an effective school is one in which pupils progress further than might be expected from a consideration of its intake (p. 27). The focus on the 'value added' by the school attempts to capture the boost given by the schools to pupils' achievement over and above what they bring in terms of prior attainment and background factors. Notwithstanding this shift, the measure of school effectiveness has nevertheless remained more or less fixed on the domain of student achievement.

In keeping with its mission to shape schooling practices, studies of school effectiveness attempt to distil pupil, teacher and school phenomena into improvement 'factors'. In the USA, the path-breaking 'Fifteen Thousand Hours' study of Rutter *et al.* (1979) highlighted elements such as: the amount of teaching; size of

school; organisation of teaching groups; effects on pupils of differing teacher expectations; teaching styles and classroom management; patterns of discipline; and overall the school climate. Sammons *et al.* (1995), in their much cited summary of school effectiveness research in developed country settings, added to these factors; highlighting elements such as participative leadership, collegiality and collaboration, high quality classroom teaching, parental involvement in children's learning and school-based professional development. Such factors are equally prevalent in effectiveness research in developing country contexts.

School effectiveness research is not without its critics. Most disparagingly, it has been described as 'policy entrepreneurship' (Ball, 1998), 'ethnocentric pseudo-science' (Hamilton, 1998) and 'politically promiscuous' (Slee & Weiner, 1998). It proposes technical solutions based on the view that schools are, a priori, in need of 'structural and/or cultural change' (Ball, 1998, p. 77), and offers 'a socially and politically de-contextualised body of literature which, wittingly or unwittingly, has provided support for the inequitable educational reform programs of neo-liberal and managerial governments' (Thrupp, 2001, p. 8). The predominance of 'check-lists' of effectiveness measures, and the extent to which these appear to be constantly superseded and updated, casts doubts about the theoretical and methodological rigour of much of the field, especially its usefulness in school improvement. Such concerns only gain weight in relation to the limited, often contradictory findings that effectiveness research offers. For all its promise, it has not been possible to show that the variance in student achievement attributable to school and classroom factors is greater than 20% (e.g. Brown, 1995). Indeed, its strongest supporters appear content to argue for a 'school effect' of between 5 and 15% (MacBeath & Mortimore, 2001). The degree of agreement about the importance of certain key variables—be they material, pedagogical, or other—continues to fluctuate.

In recent years school effectiveness researchers have attempted to counter these criticisms (e.g. Reynolds & Teddlie, 2001; Stringfield, 2002). For example, attempts have been made to develop better 'affective' outcome measures (e.g. student satisfaction, social skills etc.), and the greater use made of country comparisons to explain variances in student outcomes has led to a more sophisticated analysis of schooling processes and possibilities across cultural contexts. Similarly, the greater use of qualitative methods, in concert with multilevel and causal analyses, have strengthened the validity of effectiveness research findings and inspired greater confidence among its proponents that they are relevant to practical school improvement strategies. The more recent focus on relations within schools—often used to complement the traditional organisational component of effectiveness research—have highlighted the important role played by interpersonal relations, micro-politics, teacher behaviour and teacher leadership (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2001). Within the mainstream school development community, therefore, optimism remains that school effectiveness research can represent a helpful tool for enquiring into schooling processes, supporting new teaching and learning practices, and informing educational policy.

School effectiveness research purports to provide similar promise for developing countries. Specifically, two decades of research continues to highlight, under certain

conditions, the relation between student achievement and the provision of textbook and reading materials, certain teacher qualities such as subject knowledge, pre-service and in-service training, and time spent on classroom instruction. Interestingly, factors such as class size, teacher salaries and classroom pedagogy—viewed as central by development agencies—are more ambiguous (e.g. Harbison & Hanushek, 1992; Scheerens, 2001).

For some, the major problem confronting school effectiveness research in developing countries is its continued tight coupling to a ‘production-function’ [1] mentality in which ‘policy mechanics’ attempt to generate universal remedies that are amenable to manipulation by ‘central agencies’ (Fuller & Clarke, 1994, p. 119). Notwithstanding the accepted links between cognitive achievement and certain inputs, research suggests that such factors have diminishing significance as overall school quality rises (Fuller, 1987). As such, the production-function tradition of school effectiveness—especially dominant in poor country settings—can be thought of as being in terminal decline as development levels rise. The fact that generic, de-contextualised, measures to assess family background in different cultural settings are notoriously inaccurate, and thus prone to lead to school factors being given even greater levels of significance, only compounds the danger of relying upon the data that such approaches generate.

Paramount among the problems facing effectiveness research in developing countries, as in developed countries, is the continued narrow focus on cognitive achievement as the primary measure of effectiveness. Such focus captures but a fragment of what counts in schooling, both in terms of processes and outcomes, but proves extremely effective for those that assume that ‘schools basically consist of interrelated units which can be “fixed” by applying the right mix of policy and resource inputs’ (Jansen, 1995, p. 190). The role of ethos, community relations, values, beliefs and attitudes towards schooling—indeed the meaning that students and others in developing countries attribute to schooling—are rarely dealt with. According to Davies (2001) there is a continuing need for discussion about how schools could ‘move away from definitions of effectiveness linked solely to academic achievement to those linked to peace, democracy, health, productivity, flexibility and lifelong learning’ (p. 509). For Harber and Davies (1997), broader approaches to effectiveness must be based on a thorough understanding of the context-specific socio-political causes of school *ineffectiveness*. For ‘fragile states’ this means, necessarily, the application of quite different ‘success’ criteria from those that are routinely applied in stable and resource-rich contexts:

The pressing questions are likely to be, for example: Have the teachers actually been there most of the year, and been paid? Are the majority of children sufficiently fed and healthy to benefit from being there? Do the children manage to attend regularly, or do they take large periods of time out for domestic or agricultural support to the family? Has the school managed to educate about avoiding malaria, HIV/AIDS or bilharzia? Has the school managed to get hold of a spirit duplicator? (Harber & Davies, 1997, p. 2)

Research from Nepal provides helpful insights into the ways in which global managerialist tendencies in education such as those represented by school effectiveness research distort the possibilities for schooling to contribute to societal development. Evidence suggests that a focus on the technology of school effectiveness encourages narrow definitions of good schools and, in the process, enables powerful groups to unduly distort education for their own purposes. The role of formal schooling in the production of broadly educated, competent and democratic citizens is thus compromised.

‘Effective’ Schools in Nepal [2]

Nepal is one of the world’s poorest societies. Urban poverty continues to grow as a consequence of the migration of rural dwellers to towns and cities, and rural poverty is ‘rampant’: approximately 44% of rural households—constituting nearly 90% of the entire population—fall below the poverty line, with a ‘hardcore’ barely able to survive (UNDP, 2001, p. 18). Poverty in Nepal has a strong social dimension, with ethnic minorities such as Tamangs, Tharus and Musahars suffering most. Occupational caste groups (e.g. blacksmith, shoemakers, tailors, etc.) comprise over 15% of the total population yet suffer from deep and entrenched discrimination. The status of women, especially from these disadvantaged groups, is even more extreme.

Nepal has experienced intense political change in recent decades. From 1962 to 1990 a form of one-party government centred upon a village-based system of administration controlled economic and social development. The late 1980s saw a period of intense political protest which culminated in the ‘People’s Movement’ of 1990 and the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1991. However, the transition to democracy has been far from straightforward. Weak systems of public administration, an inadequate separation of key institutions and processes, and a lack of transparency in public life have undermined national planning, administration and service delivery (Louise Brown, 1996). [3] While the education sector has benefited from a large and coordinated line ministry, there are nevertheless multiple difficulties in relation to technical capacity within the system, decision making and resource allocation processes (Bista & Carney, 2000).

In relation to schooling, many studies and reports emphasise the problem areas within the education sector as inadequate access and low participation, low retention of students at all levels, low levels of educational quality, inequalities in relation to various regions and social groups, limited managerial capacity, inadequate institutional support and financing. After a decade of policy focus on access to education, retention and progression of students within the system, the net enrolment rate in primary education (students aged 6 to 10 years old) is less than 70% and that of secondary education (students aged 14 to 17 years old) is about 40%. The quality of school facilities is poor, with the majority of school buildings reflecting the material poverty of the society in general. Both policy makers and teacher unions acknowledge teacher effectiveness, a crucial element in providing quality education, as being low. The majority of schoolteachers are untrained, and in contrast to one of the important tenets of Hinduism, the social status of teaching is relatively low and declining.

Political interference in teacher appointments and transfers only adds to low morale and disenchantment.

National planning attempts to tackle such issues within an overall agenda 'to create a society that is cultured, modern, development-oriented' (NPC, 1997, p. 59). Enhancing the quality, efficiency and relevance of education, in addition to improving access and equity, are central to this overall aim (e.g. Bista & Carney 2000; NPC, 1998; MOES, 1997). The Tenth Five Plan, currently in preparation, prioritises the need to produce citizens with an awareness of 'nationality, democracy, human rights and social responsibilities'. While the needs of the economy are also acknowledged, the primary goal relates to nation building. The provision for mother tongue instruction, enshrined in the constitution, symbolises the commitment of society to inclusion, difference and tolerance (MOES, 2002).

Notwithstanding this broad national vision, much of the educational development agenda in Nepal has been supported, if not shaped explicitly, by the orientations of major international donor agencies; especially those from the Nordic countries, Japan, the UK, European Union, and the Asian Development Bank (Bista & Carney, 2000). The first major intervention in the primary education sector commenced in 1992, with the Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP) aimed at improving access, quality and management efficiency across the sector. However, while significant increases in enrolment rates were recorded, it was soon apparent that this success was not being matched by similar advances in 'learning achievement' (MOE, 1999, p. 8). As a consequence, a key recommendation arising from the mid-term review of the Project was to change the principal focus from 'inputs' such as curriculum development and textbooks to 'processes and outcomes', especially managerial efficiency and improved exam pass rates (MOE, 1999, p. 8). A major aim of the second phase of the Programme (BPEP II, planned for the period 1999 to 2004) therefore, was to improve 'quality', viewed in large part in terms of improved scores in national examinations. [4]

This particular approach to 'quality' created the space for a series of donor-funded achievement studies at the primary level that have tended to shift attention away from the Government's overall policy objective of democratic and inclusive schools, towards the technical and managerial inputs required to enhance pupils' cognitive development. The first major national achievement study in Nepal (EDSC 1995) focused on some 3,500 primary school students in Grade 3 (pupils aged 8 years). [5] Testing was carried out in three subjects: Nepali, mathematics and serofero (broadly translated as social studies), with a range of potentially significant contributing factors taken into account (i.e. student, parent, teacher and school factors). The overall achievement level across these subjects was within the 44–50% band, with a national average of some 45%. Achievement in social studies was highest, with mathematics being lowest. Results varied by ecological region (i.e. mountains, hills, and Terai/plains running north to south), as well as across the country's five administrative zones. While enduring their own difficulties in reaching what are often inaccessible schools, students residing in the hill regions of the country tended to outperform their contemporaries in the less sparsely inhabited mountains and Terai or plains regions. The most obvious case was in Nepali language, where mountain and hill dwellers were more likely to use this as their main language, if not mother tongue.

School factors were judged as being the most significant determinants of educational achievement, with teacher supervision, regular school management committee meetings, classroom space and adequate budgets seen as closely linked to student achievement. Surprisingly, while the low attainment levels of parents were noted, there were 'no significant results' in terms of family factors. Nevertheless, it was noted that the parents of children attending the 'top' ten schools were native Nepali speakers, with the parents of those attending the 'bottom' ten schools coming from other language groups.

From this base the study recommended a number of actions, including a system of continuous assessment to monitor and control 'instructional inputs', improvements in teacher training, and a review of curricula and learning materials (primarily textbooks). Interestingly, the study highlighted the equivalent performance levels within the private school system, noting that an average national achievement level of over 75% should be seen by the public schools as a call to utilise their resources more efficiently, improve the competence of their teachers, and enhance and sustain the involvement of communities in the education process.

A second national achievement study, conducted at Grade 5 (pupils notionally aged 10 years), was carried out two years later. Here, a similar number of students were tested in the same three subjects, with results in Nepali and social studies replicating quite closely those from the earlier study. Of most concern were attainment levels in mathematics where a mean score of 27% was recorded. Once again, regional variations were noted. A similar set of influencing factors was identified, with school factors—especially classroom practices—singled out for particular attention.

Such studies must be scrutinised thoroughly if they are to support educational reform in countries where schooling plays an important role in the process of modernisation. While the response of policy makers has been to press on with efforts to improve both access *and* quality in basic education, those promoting cognitive achievement as a major measure of quality have made possible a different educational agenda. Rather than concentrate policy makers on the role of education as a tool for social justice and nation building, such studies have legitimised a particular type of excellence at the expense of broader considerations of equity. Compounding matters, the concentration on the role of school factors—when the majority of other research findings point to the importance of family background and lifestyle—places unrealistic demands upon teachers and schools to overcome a range of established (and legitimate) social customs and norms that affect attitudes about schooling, as well as schooling processes and outcomes. Similarly, the reliance upon technical inputs to monitor and supervise teachers, and the assumption that the 'instructional transaction' (EDSC, 1997, p. 111) is the key to 'quality' needs to be problematised. While not acknowledging explicitly their intellectual roots, such studies, by virtue of these characteristics alone, can be located clearly within the dominant production-function model of school effectiveness research.

In terms of students' cognitive development, it is certainly clear that schools in Nepal—as far as such studies help us to explore this—struggle to add 'value'. For school effectiveness researchers certain technical solutions surface again and again as

the basis for change. However, the perpetual failure of Government strategies in these areas, especially in districts where educational interventions have been extensive, suggests that school development depends upon a range of technical, resource and culture factors that are not easily conceptualised by achievement data, or manipulated by technical inputs.

Unlike the instrumentalist assumptions that underpin school effectiveness research, more agency-oriented scholarship suggests that participants appropriate schooling in ways that relate both to national *and* diverse personal agendas. Schools, like other social institutions, are not simply spaces in which passive subjects are shaped to conform to agreed goals and visions, even though certain technologies attempt to make this possible. [6] Rather, schools and the processes in and around them offer participants, be they students, teachers, parents or policy makers, opportunities to create alternative worlds. From their own research in Nepal, Skinner and Holland (1996) note that students use schooling both to support and oppose aspects of the official agenda of the state. Most significantly, young people appear to have embraced schooling—denied to the majority of Nepalis until recently—as a strategy with which to challenge dominant constructions of caste, religion and gender, and to assert their place as active agents in society. However, while schooling offers the prospect of ‘emancipation from oppression’, entry to the new social category of what Skinner and Holland call ‘the educated person’ also opens up space to generate ‘new divisions, new distinctions of privilege, and new forms of disdain’ (p. 274). For many newly ‘educated’ students, formal qualifications provide symbolic capital with which to impose alternative status relations.

This research, carried out in the pre-democratic Nepal of the mid-1980s, focused on the largely unintended consequences of schooling as liberation and subjugation. In essence, students’ active constructions of schooling were in stark contrast to official views that depicted formal education as a vehicle for national development, the creation of loyalty to the state and tolerance of cultural difference. Such acts of reconstruction take many forms. More recent phenomena in Nepal, especially the rapid growth of profit-making schools, shed further light on the nature of education as ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1977), highlighting in the process the pervasive influence of neo-liberalism, especially the ideology of school effectiveness, in supporting such tendencies.

While private schools in Nepal vary in their size, mission and influence, a number of common factors are evident. Even though many provide a broader curriculum experience for children, where sport, craft and the arts are more prominent, most schools present themselves solely in terms of levels of academic achievement in national examinations, and the informal league tables that these make possible. In contravention of the Education Act that provides for a ‘national language’ as the main language of instruction, an increasing number of private schools adopt English as the medium for teaching, demoting Nepali (for many the lingua franca) to secondary status. While mother tongue instruction is struggling to find a place in state schools, it has never been on the agenda of the private sector. In organisational terms, most private schools adopt autocratic management systems in which community stakeholders, content to see their own children succeed academically, are often excluded

from discussions about the ways in which their children's education relates to broader national education goals. Teachers are appointed without recourse to state regulations and are poorly paid in relation to their generally higher levels of qualifications. Short-term contracts and limited union representation weaken their professional status further. Most recently, research suggests that the private sector's tendency to charge an ever-expanding range of fees for its 'educational services' has legitimised the commercialisation of primary education in general and provided a moral ground for the public sector to defy the Constitution and do likewise. While this outrages many, one observation has been the tendency among less confident parents to view Nepal's commitment to universal schooling, enshrined in its constitution, more as political rhetoric than policy reality. The fact that the bureaucratic elite favours the private sector for the education of its own children signals further the legitimacy of a two-tier system (Simkhada, 2001).

The reasons for the rapid growth of non-state schools are many. One set of issues concerns the extent to which the agenda of private education has mirrored the rhetoric and intent of increasingly laissez-faire public policy in general. The appeal to the language of efficiency, empowerment and markets in education has found ready parallels in broader public discourse about reordering the state in ways that minimise both its influence and responsibility. Financial pressures, especially in the face of an escalating guerrilla insurgency, have curtailed the public provision of services in general, and legitimised the Government's poor record of investment in education. Low and declining levels of educational achievement in the public sector, coupled with the long-held supremacy of the national school leaving examination as the arbitrator of educational success, have only served to encourage parents—at least those that can be described as 'upwardly mobile stakeholders'—to abandon the state system (Simkhada, 2001).

A distinctly western 'technical' view would suggest that middle-class parents could be persuaded back into the state system by a concerted programme of investment and development. Perhaps the opposite is true. Nepal is a highly stratified society in which adherence to a rigid system of social distinction based on religious caste continues to order all significant social relations (Gellner, 2001; UNDP, 2001). The reluctance of higher status groups to engage seriously with other groups for the purposes of promoting the state education 'project' has been recognised as an impediment to Nepal's modernisation (e.g. Bista, 1994; Louise Brown, 1996). However, the interplay of neo-liberalism, fiscal constraint, weak public governance and a fledgling democracy have created considerable space in which the elite and rising middle class of Nepal (i.e. predominantly the same upper caste groups but those in the process of accumulating material capital) can now redefine and reorder schooling in ways that reinforce historic power differentials and socio-economic distinctions. Indeed, one of the more remarkable recommendations arising from the achievement studies discussed here (EDSC, 1999) was that there should be no further expansion of access to basic education until the 'quality' of existing provision was improved; even though at that time less than 80% of males and 60% of females were enrolled in schooling. While quality is defined in terms of narrow measures of student achievement, such arguments continue to gain credibility.

Such iniquitous forms of cultural reproduction undermine the possibilities for schooling to play a role in societal change, and it is hard to see how neo-liberal and managerialist policies are not contributing to this process. The school effectiveness tradition, with its belief that school quality and cognitive achievement are one, and that these are dependent upon manipulating a series of internal variables, appears to buttress such policies, lending much credibility to those engaged in reshaping schooling in ways that serve the narrow interests of the few. However, if one examines the 'hard evidence' from the school effectiveness literature, the apparent success of these groups in creating 'good' schools has much more to do with the socio-economic status and existing cultural capital of such stakeholders than with the appropriate manipulation of school-level variables. Beyond dispute are the devastating consequences: an exodus from the public system of the very community members required to make comprehensive schooling, and more democratic forms of social life, work.

Conclusion: centring culture in considerations about 'good' schooling

Policy makers appointed to oversee the modernisation of nation states repeatedly champion the link between education and economic and social prosperity (UNDP, 2002a). Student achievement is seen as an important indicator of educational development, and school effectiveness research finds a ready audience in those development banks and donor agencies that require data with which to compare and shape schooling systems. However, the dominant approach to school effectiveness views high achievement levels as the primary, if not sole, indicator of school quality. This may be tolerable, though by no means satisfactory, in western countries where democratic structures and values are by and large embedded. The case in much of the developing world is quite different. While acknowledging the role of education in individual growth, schooling is also expected to play a critical role in nurturing more equal relations within societies (e.g. UNDP, 2001; UNDP, 2002b). Such aspirations demand appropriate support from educational research.

One way forward is to press on within the existing paradigm and develop more sophisticated processes for measuring 'effectiveness'. To some extent this is now taking place as researchers hear the call to undertake more classroom-oriented studies that might contextualise student achievement data (Scheerens, 2001b). Writers such as Fuller and Clarke (1994), for instance, suggest a greater focus on the role of things such as family demand for schooling, the capacity of schools to respond to foreign forms of knowledge, the demands placed upon teachers in terms of subject knowledge and pedagogy, and the nature of pupils' responses to such phenomena. Such elements require more qualitative approaches to enquiry, both in and out of schools, and contextualise achievement data in potentially helpful ways. Nevertheless, this broader approach retains its focus upon student cognitive gains, and continues to support the work of policy makers and others as they shape education to fit certain political and ideological needs.

A second way forward, still linked to the 'effectiveness' tradition, is to develop indicators that might contribute to the assessment of a broader range of outcomes.

Such an approach would certainly require policy makers to consider more fully the relations between schooling, democracy and freedom and, one could posit, still provide international agencies with sufficient evidence that developing countries remained engaged in the western constructed project of modernisation. In this regard, the acknowledgement, especially by development banks, of the interrelation between schooling processes and democratic practices, and the development of democratic indicators to shape school reform efforts, is helpful. The obvious limitation of this approach would be the absence of straightforward criteria on which to judge and control schools. In this regard, the broadening of effectiveness measures away from quantifiable data related to cognitive achievement conflicts fundamentally with the managerialist desire to intervene in school processes.

An alternative path is to break the tight coupling between educational research, policy and international comparison that characterises the school effectiveness tradition, and to engage in forms of inquiry that locate issues of social inequality into considerations about schooling. Critical ethnography is one helpful way forward. For Carspecken (2001) such researchers assume that:

. . . contemporary societies have systematic inequalities complexly maintained and reproduced by culture. They are opposed to inequality, which they conceptualise as a structural feature of society, and they wish to conduct research that will support efforts to reduce it. (p. 4)

One important strategy within such ethnography is to centre notions of identity and meaning into the analysis in ways that necessitate a focus on stakeholders' interpretations of the various acts that constitute formal schooling. For example, the implicit assumption that education is conducted within a context of goal agreement and consensus, still prevalent in the effectiveness movement in spite of its demise in the sociology of education many years ago (e.g. Baldrige, 1971; Ball, 1987; Hoyle, 1986) must be challenged and overturned. Similarly, the notion that students and their families are implicitly colluding with policy makers by themselves prioritising academic knowledge, cognitive development and credentialism needs to be scrutinised. While the urban middle-class elite and those with like aspirations *seem* to accept increasingly narrow definitions of 'good' schooling, anthropological research such as that represented by Skinner and Holland (1996) remind us that schooling serves many purposes, and that for the vast majority of Nepalis (i.e. those living in rural areas) schooling represents, above all else, the prospect of respite from what they themselves view as oppressive social traditions and expectations.

Research could examine the links, as they might exist, between 'schooling' and the broader category of 'education', and consider ways in which schools could serve the needs of stakeholders—be they pupils, teachers, parents or community members—more realistically and meaningfully. Rather than attempting to shape stakeholders to the needs of some internationally defined conception of progress, such research would aim to explore ways in which schooling might take account of the aspirations of stakeholders in order that it might be meaningful to their lives and to their own development needs. A necessary starting point would be the acknowledgement that

such individual agendas may relate tangentially at best to the formal aims of the schooling system. Among many potential outcomes, research could highlight the ways in which particular groups—be they policy makers, parents, students or teachers—capture schooling for vested purposes. Research might also shed light on the very different aspirations and motivations of society's most impoverished groups. In Nepal, for example, it is clear that the vast majority of people (i.e. those living in abject poverty great distances from urban centres and the services they provide) have little or no say in the aims or processes of 'their' education system and are only vaguely aware of the material and social benefits it might bestow. Their voices are not heard in the current debate about 'quality' in education, and the neo-liberal tendencies that drive educational policy in Nepal are serving to silence them more.

Those wishing to compare and reform educational systems will continue to carry out effectiveness-style studies, and a broad approach to educational development would continue to take some note of these. It is hoped therefore, that the multiple concerns surrounding such methodologies continue to be voiced and taken seriously. However, the history of educational change suggests quite strongly that lasting reform must be grounded in the needs of stakeholders, as articulated by them (Fullan, 1998). These needs can be helpfully articulated and ordered by research that attempts to critique and attack top-down neo-liberal and managerialist tendencies in education, and locate complex and ambiguous actors more centrally in the analysis. In the process, narrower conceptions of schooling, especially those promoted by the school effectiveness movement, might be problematised by policy makers that currently rely upon them to shape practices.

Of course, there will be few people that view the research agenda outlined here as a panacea for the ills of education in developing countries, or as a radical tool with which to defeat powerful interest groups. Such approaches may not undermine the greater impact of technologies such as those represented by the school effectiveness tradition. There seems no compelling reason, however, for other researchers to legitimise them.

NOTES

- [1] Fuller and Clarke (1994) use this term as a metaphor for the 'mechanical' way in which major development institutions in particular employ empirical research to 'isolate those instructional inputs and uniform teaching practices that yield higher achievement' (p. 120).
- [2] The terms 'public', 'state' and 'comprehensive' schools are used interchangeably in this paper.
- [3] The transition to democracy in Nepal has not been smooth. Since the mid-1990s the country has been affected by a 'Maoist' insurgency aimed at ending constitutional monarchy and the inequalities that are claimed as stemming from it. In late 2002 the King of Nepal, acting in accordance with the constitution, suspended multi-party democracy on the grounds that the Nepali Congress Party Government was not able to ensure free and fair elections in the face of heightened hostilities with the Maoists. While a timetable was set for general elections and a return to multi-part rule, the social and economic inequalities that gave birth to the Maoist movement seem as intractable as ever.
- [4] Indeed, the Programme Implementation Plan for BPEP II (MOE 1999) sets 'learning' targets in terms of increased achievement at the national assessment examination. It is envisaged that

average achievement at Grade 3 level (see footnote below) will increase from 50% to 75% by 2004.

- [5] The official age for students in Grade 3 is 8 years although high repetition rates mean that a wide age-range can be found in any typical class. The achievement studies described here do not explicitly clarify the ages of the students that were tested.
- [6] See Skinner *et al.* (1998) for a useful review of changing conceptions of identity and agency in the history of anthropology.

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