Retelling the Education Story: Bringing "Cool" to School Using Progressivism

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Retelling the Education Story: Bringing “Cool” to School Using Progressivism

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Abstract

Nepal’s education system is littered with flaws: teachers are underpaid and untrained, development of the curriculum is neglected, and the number of students failing examinations is higher than the number of those who pass. These problems are consistent throughout the country and as a result, the system that supposedly aims to produce future scientists, engineers, and leaders instead churns out citizens and leaders that repeat the mistakes of past generations. In the past, there has been no movement or reform planned for the low quality of schooling. However, different schools and organizations scattered throughout the country are attempting to do something about the problem by adopting new pedagogies; in one of Nepal’s poorest and most remote districts is the Modern Model Residential School (MMRS), which has adopted a progressive approach to teaching students. The school aims to avoid the traditional form of education commonly found in Nepal and use different technology in combination with hands-on learning to develop skills. This paper dives into how schools like MMRS use progressivism to attempt to change the system that has been characterized as problematic for over half-a-century now.

Keywords: Philosophy of education, education: administration, curriculum and instruction
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Introduction

The Old Education Story

Education is the foundation of civilization. This is a sentiment echoed by almost every culture throughout history (Gray 2008). Education is how a society grows from a group of people scavenging for survival to a community working towards scientific progress and technological innovation. Schools produce citizens and leaders that can end up establishing a robust democracy for their region or end up developing new businesses and companies that improve economic prospect (Dixit 2002). Such a significant system is prone to dilemma; affirmative action, financial complications, standardized testing, failure rates, and more (Koper 2004). Often, these problems are attributed to what is being taught in schools: religious texts, gender theory, evolutionary biology, etc. This purpose of this paper is to focus instead on how the how of education plays a major role both in being the source of these problems and more importantly, the solutions.

Retelling the Story

Nepal is a prime example of the conflict found in education because it, more than most other countries, invites self-examination because its government and community offer minimal support (Bhatta 2009; Dixit 2002). It has been up to the schools and teachers themselves to study its increasing failure rates, poor-quality curriculums, and its infrastructure crisis and elevate standards beyond the simple pass-fail ones set upon the students by the

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bureaucracy.

Attempts at reform appear to have largely been unsuccessful; the government focuses on enrollment in school above all else (Bista 2017). As long as parents send their kids to school, the Department of Education is satisfied and is free to move onto other agendas (Dixit 2002). Education policymakers do nothing more than aid this line of thinking; according to the *Nepal Education Section Review* (2001), the government deals primarily with numbers and statistics and has never put any effort in understanding what is going on at the ground level (Dixit 2002). As a result, oversight is ignored and like conflict, money is thrown at the problem (Bhatta 2009), and in this case, the thrower does not have much money.

Many schools and organizations have attempted to take matters into their own hands and are doing it by focusing on the *how* of teaching. The Modern Model Residential School (MMRS), for example, created their own curriculum that prioritizes teachers and technology playing more of a role in the students’ education (MMRS, n.d.). Karkhana, meanwhile, an extracurricular makerspace, focuses on promoting a more pragmatic and hands-on approach to teaching (Karkhana, n.d.). Both groups are attempting to make a dent in the system by changing the way classes are taught; they use computers and technology to present certain concepts; they encourage debate and discussion to get the students critically thinking; and at the end of the day, both MMRS and Karkhana are satisfied if their students have learned something over scoring high marks on a government-issued examination. But
this shift is not an official one. Despite being privately funded, MMRS still has to have their curriculum approved by the government (Bista 2017) and therefore does not have complete control of adopting new pedagogies without being restricted. Without any official amendments to such a system, it is likely that Nepal will be left with citizens who are bound to repeat the mistakes of past generations of corrupt politicians and uneducated leaders (Dixit 2002).

Understanding the consequences of having an unsatisfactory school system is crucial because the root of the obstacles we face today are buried in the foundation of not only what we learn, but how we learn. The truth is education does not exist for the benefit of students, parents, or teachers, but for the benefit of the social order because societies have always been better off with a well-educated population (Green 2014); it is the nature of history to favor those who have been nurtured and educated not to memorize the passage on the irrelevant passage put before them but those who have learned how to critically think and understand the world around them (Mayer 2002).

My research deals with answering the following questions: How have schools like the Modern Model Residential School attempted to reform the education system using their own unique approach to teaching? What dichotomies exist as a result of the shift in education? How does adopting new pedagogies affect how successful students are based on both the government’s education standards and the schools that have created these pedagogies?

**Literature Review**

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**Education in Nepal**

The focus on education is considered fairly new in Nepal; only about fifty years ago did the country make education a right for every citizen (Bhatta 2009). It was around this time that the Ministry of Education was created and primary education was provided free of charge (Stash and Hannum 2009). Problems arose as caste and gender conflicts affected enrollment and progress during classes, but the most detrimental problems occurred with the quality of education offered (Bhatta 2009). Proof lies in what is known as SLC examinations (also called “iron gate” because of its tradition of keeping most students from further education); high failure rates occur mostly in public schools that are known to be extremely difficult, especially in English, Science and Math (which are also often the only subjects offered in these schools) (Mathema and Bista 2006). The SLC tests themselves are consistently considered faulty as they only test a student’s rote-memory skills because the system only aims to produce manpower for the government workforce (Dixit 2002).

Attempts at fixing these issues have failed as a result of a misunderstanding of the cause of the problem (Bhatta 2009); the Ministry of Education has sight only for numbers and statistics (Stash and Hannum 2009). Almost two decades ago the government produced the Basic Primary Education Project (BPEP), an extremely expensive development project aimed at in-service training of teachers with the goal of creating at least one model school that can allow further funding and expansion of the project (Dixit
2002). Even by government standards, the project has been deemed a failure as it fell short of creating any such “model” school. Another example of attempted reform is the Community School Support Project, a World Bank-funded project aiming to promote community involvement and ownership in education (Bhatta 2009). The project’s major weakness is in the discourse it fails to promote; bureaucrats, teacher unions, and parents all have different understanding of policies and management. As a result, more disagreements arise and nothing gets done because everyone is too focused on winning the debate (Mathema and Bista 2006).

Other projects like PEDP are along the same line -- they focus on a top-down approach that moves things around here and there but end up producing no behavioral changes among teachers and students (Bhatta 2009). Mistakes made by these projects can be attributed to the lack of evaluation of how students learn and how teachers teach (Dixit 2002). Many studies and reports about why the quality of education in Nepal is poor consist primarily of examination results, enrollment rates, or funding statistics. Interviews with teachers, parents, and alumni and observations of student behavior in classrooms is rare and goes unnoticed by the bureaucrats throwing money at the problem to make it go away. Independent social scientists and researchers of education policy have other theories on what the best way to tackle the education dilemma.

**Traditional vs. Progressive Education**
Educational practice is a core component of basic learning research and yet it is still overlooked (Ertmer and Newby 2013). Which pedagogy a school adopts reflect how its students learn and is essential when trying to increase the quality of education (Dixit 2002). In the more generic sense, the education in Nepal can be broken up into two different types of approaches to teaching: traditional and progressive (Bhatta 2009).

Traditional education is essentially what the system has been using for the past half-century; rote-learning and memorization is focused on with an emphasis on the subject and acquisition of as much information as possible about the subject (Conham 2016). Textbooks are centered on and teachers play the role of lecturer strictly. Parents and older teachers often prefer this type of pedagogy, because it is the kind of education they grew up (Dixit 2002).

Progressive education, on the other hand, is more conceptual and concentrates instead on using hands-on activities and discussions to teach (Conham 2016). Students are encouraged to be in groups and work together on solving problems while the teacher takes a more indirect role.

Which pedagogy is ultimately better is disagreed on throughout Nepal and it is because of this disagreement that no concrete solution to the high failure rates has been found (Bhatta 2009; Dixit 2002; Stash and Hannum 2009). An agreement cannot be reached because of the lack of evaluation which is due to a lack of care (Stash and Hannum 2009). For now, the traditional system of education which has been common throughout Nepal for many years has been kept in place in most government schools (Bhatta 2009).
There is a consensus on instituting progressive schooling among the new generation of teachers and researchers; studies in the U.S. and other Western countries have yielded results that support progressive over traditional methods of teaching (Mayer 2002), but the older generation appears to be against change. As a result, there now exists a culture “where people fail to take their work seriously, as the evaluation is not based on the work done or the the capability to do work, but on the ability to regurgitate on the answer sheet what has been memorised” (Dixit 2002), which ends up teaching students little in the long run. Students who fail look to getting low-level jobs in the government while students who pass travel to the U.S. to continue their schooling in a higher-quality education system (Dixit 2002; Stash and Hannum 2009).

A Modernist Perspective

A pattern gone thus far little acknowledged is how the type of pedagogy preferred is also one that is considered “modern” (Conham 2016). The kind of schooling in Western countries is essentially progressive and considered high-quality because of the state of the society -- communities with higher quality schools tended to have higher life expectancy rates and higher standards of living (Baral 2011). Even now there is a distinct correlation between quality of education and quality of life with countries like the United States ranking high in both categories and countries like Nepal ranking significantly lower (Bhatta 2009). Moreso there seems to be a pattern that the
more poverty-stricken areas in the world have that indistinguishable mark of low-quality schooling (Dixit 2002).

In a Modernist view of education, these areas exhibit characteristics that Walt Rostow described are consistent with countries that hover in the lower stages of development. For example, heavy reliance on subsistence farming, limited technology, and traditional ways of conducting day-to-day activities are all common and prevalent in these areas. These factors go hand-in-hand with how quality of education may be defined. For instance, low quality education prioritizes teaching theoretically with primary focus on textbooks and memorization (Baral 2011). This fits what Rostow describes define countries in the lower stages of his model. Students get discouraged as a result as they do not have the ability to apply their knowledge; they end up going to countries like the United States where the schools there can provide them with the type of education they need to succeed (Stash and Hannum 2009). Hoselitz adds that the quality of education is a good measure of defining each stage as it can be seen as a catalyst for westernization (Przeworski and Limongi 2012).

Nepal is one of the countries that can be described with these lower-stage characteristics, especially in terms of education (Baral 2011). Nepal’s schools stick to a traditional approach to teaching because Rostow’s barriers of development set it up that way; it is because of the lack of resources and the existence of other problems like community forestry or poverty that education is stuck with traditional methods of schooling in a

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modern world that has shifted to progressivism (Bhatta 2009).

**Methodology**

**The Plan Before**

The plan was to stay in one of the poorest villages in the world for three weeks. Putting it that way sounded far more thrilling but harmful to my psyche, as I quickly became irresponsible in thought.

Logistics wise, I planned the following: I decided that personal interviews would be conducted by recording them with my iPhone camera instead of taking handwritten notes. This is so I could, first, give my undivided attention to the interviewee and second, so I could replay the interview later to resolve misunderstandings and mistranslations. Observations would be typed on my laptop. I did not believe the language barrier would be much of a problem, despite learning that the district spoke a different dialect of Nepali; the school was often visited by American volunteers, so I believed that they must have had a way to communicate with foreigners. I thought any other logistics and research-related methodology could be improvised.

If anything, this brought along a sort of reckless attitude in me brought on by the excitement of going to a community on the other end of a spectrum, opposite the United States. Experience thus far suggested it would be an easy time getting people to provide sufficient information. There was never any problem doing research before as I found most people enjoyed sharing their wisdom and experience. Simply put, despite everything I had learned in class,
I firmly believed fieldwork seemed to solely consist of asking questions and recording answers, for my experiences had not proven otherwise.

The Trouble With Lalu

Things did not go as expected. Firstly, the drastically different living conditions made the stay in Lalu almost intolerable; the food, which seemed to be ordinary Nepali daalbhaat, was distasteful; the slow-speed, flickering Wi-Fi made doing any online research impossible; and the locals were reluctant to be interviewed due to other priorities. I stayed at MMRS with four other children, all without mothers or fathers or close-toed shoes. They were delighted to have someone new to play with and would often find their way into my poorly-locked room.

The Lalu locals I did get the chance to interview misinterpreted the questions often, despite several attempts at clarification; this was most likely due to their different dialect and different interpretations of Nepali words. Some of the men were even intoxicated throughout the day and could not form coherent sentences much less answer questions. Recording the interviews with my phone’s camera also did not go as expected. The interviewees preferred being interviewed outside (as their homes and shops were often occupied) and the noise from other locals, dogs, kids, and the wind made it difficult to decipher audio in any of the videos. Taking the videos proved to be another challenge as the locals were fascinated by the technology and wanted their pictures taken or to see pictures of America and my own home. One local
offered to help me record an interview but had trouble operating the camera and a quarter of the interview was lost.

Observations were, like planned, written down in a notes application on my laptop. After the first couple of attempts ended poorly (the children would try to grab the laptop whenever I took notes), I switched to hand-written notes and recorded them in my laptop late at night, when the village was asleep. This was also when I attempted to decipher the videos of interviews and analyze themes and patterns found in previous iterations of notes.

In the end, I had to return earlier than expected. The research was not going as planned and I believed it would be more advantageous to return to Kathmandu and finish my research in a more comfortable environment.

**The Flaw in the Plan**

It is necessary to avoid pushing your own perceptions onto your work. For example, one of the biggest problems I ran into throughout my experience in Nepal was how I defined and imagined poverty. My time here proved that poverty was so much more than just lack of technology; having less technology does not say much about how a poor a village is; the people of the village of Marpha in Mustang proved this. They did not have homes with working showers or air conditioners and yet Marpha is one of the wealthiest places in Mustang because of the influx of tourists swarming in as they trekked through the Himalayas. This is crucial to understand when conducting fieldwork because the researcher’s perspective on the place they study
essentially defines how interviews and observations and experiments are conducted.

I knew Lalu was poor; I had heard this notion thrown around many times before and again I fell into the trap of thinking of westernization; my pre-perception of Lalu caused me to ultimately overlook any understanding of true poverty. When I arrived at the village, my sense of adventure fleeted away and I realized I had become a victim of delusion: as fascinated as the locals were with my phone and computer, they did not care much for it beyond initial curiosity; asking questions about their hopes and goals in future development yielded answers that did not include more technology or more food or water; and finally, money was not that universal answer to life like I imagined. In fact, in one instance, I grew quite frustrated with the limitations of research and the fact that I could not and probably would never be able to change the social order with the paper I was writing. I decided to take action and handed a Lalu local a thousand rupees and told him that his family could use it far more than I could. He did not pocket it immediately and shower me with gratitude as I expected; instead he smiled, and handed it back and told me there was nothing he could do with it.

Fieldwork is complex and the discouragement I felt at its limitations and misconceptions only added to the frustration I was feeling living in Lalu. It was not the difficulty in managing interviews or trying to write my paper while looking at my notes in the tiny light I was given late at night but moreso how restricted I felt. There is more to research than just asking questions and
jotting down observations and that really presented itself when I put down my notebook and saw the orphans kicking around a basketball waiting for school to start or when I laughed and talked about the outside world with different families huddled around mosquitoes and a carrom board.

**Research Findings**

My research consisted of observations and interviews involving various schools (with three at the forefront) and how they used unique approaches to teaching. These schools were chosen for specific reasons: the Modern Model Residential School was picked because of its location in an extremely poor and remote environment; Karkhana was picked because it was extracurricular and had researchers looking into its pedagogy already; and Rato Bangala because of its exceptional reputation in Kathmandu. Almost all of the interviewees involved agreed in their descriptions of the education system in Nepal: the education system is dysfunctional.

**The Modern Model Residential School**

MMRS focuses on teachers -- according to Prakash Bista, founder of MMRS, the public education system’s faults are all because of how teachers are treated. He says that if teachers are not paid well, they lose interest in their position and are more likely to treat their classes with little care and sometimes even refuse to go to school because they do not have any consequences. MMRS avoids this conflict by first making sure their teachers
are comfortable (Basyal 2017); they are granted free room and board at the school, and a decent salary. According to Shomi Basyal, principal of MMRS, teacher training is taken very seriously but unfortunately is in dire need of improvement due to lack of professionals and experts to conduct the training. Basyal says she relies on volunteers and organizations from Kathmandu to help her develop these trainings, but she claims it still lacks substance because MMRS is in an extremely rural area and the experts who offer help do not completely understand what life is like there.

Besides teachers, MMRS has attempted to adopt the use of technology in how they teach. They use old laptops donated from universities in the United States. Routers for WiFi are imported from Manma, but unfortunately are not efficient; Basyal says the internet speeds are infuriatingly slow. As a result, the school has offline versions of different resources. These include an offline Wikipedia, offline games, and an offline Khan Academy.

Volunteers are also a big part of MMRS. According to Bista and Basyal, graduates from different U.S. universities often come by to volunteer. They usually bring with them new ways to teach. For example, two students from Dartmouth College visited Lalu in 2014 and offered to examine a few classes and give feedback to the school. They came to the conclusion that books were more of a hinderance than a benefit to students as the students rarely read them because they could not understand them. This was met with much backlash from the parents of the students, who believed that messing with the traditional system was nothing short of blasphemy (Bista 2017).
According to Basyal, this type of thinking is common, not only in Lalu, but in Nepal as well. She told me about a time when the school decided to do away with physical punishment. MMRS switched instead to time-outs and detentions. Basyal said the parents were furious and all of them demanded that physical punishment be reestablished because a child cannot learn if they are not hit. Despite the negative reactions, MMRS has stuck to its new policy.

Bista revealed that although they are a privately funded school, the government still has to approve their curriculum. As a result, many of their changes -- adding discussion time, playing educational games, reducing the number of examinations -- has been rejected in favor of further enforcement of the traditional system. Teachers are discouraged as well; any lesson plans they create for the students end up being overridden by the government. Bista says they still can make the changes they want if they prove to the government that they meet government standards because he believes that the Department of Education will not attempt to quash their style of teaching if they produce the one and only thing the officials care about -- results. But with parent resistance, it is hard for them to do anything of the sort.

Basyal’s current solution is to separate the parents from the school. At first, MMRS encouraged parent involvement and invited them to monthly meetings where they could learn about what their child is learning and also raise concerns they had. These quickly turned from financial matters to pedagogical ones. Parents disliked the concept of progressive education because, according to Nirendra Bista, teacher and parent in Lalu, “change is
hard and sticking to the old ways is best” (2017).

Based on observations and interactions, the students seemed to enjoy class most when they were allowed to apply what they learned through activities they would get to participate in at times. For example, in one instance, the teachers took the students outside for English class and played a game in which the teacher would point to a body part or something in the environment and have the students competing for who could say the English word for the thing first. I asked the students to recall English words a few days later and the ones they remembered first were the ones brought up in the game. Basyal told me this was common -- students almost always remembered what they learned when they did activities outside.

Bista says that MMRS is just beginning; still they have to abide by the traditional system because of the government and the parents backlash anytime there is a significant change in the daily routine of the students. Basyal says that for now, they just have to take it slow. They have recently added a “homework hour” after school for the students to get one-on-one tutoring with the teachers; support from few parents like Nirendra Bista help spread influence among the families; and technologies are continually flowing in from universities and organizations in the U.S. because of Prakash Bista’s presence there.

**Karkhana**

Karkhana is a type of extracurricular organization called a makerspace.
This is essentially a group that prioritizes hands-on learning and allows students to work in a space that encourages do-it-yourself projects, electronics, and other types of craft. While not an actual school, Karkhana’s primary focus is on building a pedagogy that allows its students to get the most out of whatever is taught (Karkhana, n.d.). The makerspace is comprised of more than just teachers and students; there are researchers and social scientists who help the organization by evaluating every class, offering feedback on how to modify their teaching style, and doing further research on methods that work for other schools, both in and out of Nepal.

Dipeshwor Shrestha (2017), one of the founders of Karkhana, says that he chose to form Karkhana instead of working at a school because they were not forced to abide by government standards and could teach freely. His goal is to promote progressive education and encourage learning as a lifelong endeavor instead of a classroom one. According to Shrestha, if a student understands how to think, he or she can do anything and this shows in Karkhana. One of the students learned how to work with LEDs and created her own table lamp. Another student built his own model of a car and attached it with a balloon that acted as a motor. These are two examples I observed that supported Shrestha’s claims.

Another major aim of Karkhana is to form a relationship between parents and the organization. Shrestha and the marketing team at Karkhana told me the kinds of complaints and feedback they get when advertising at schools and elsewhere from parents -- they do not want students wasting their
time when they should be studying for actual school, they do not want to waste their money on something that will never be relevant in the students lives, etc. To fight this, the teachers at Karkhana offer sessions before and after class to show parents what it is they do and why it is important to emphasize critical thinking and hands-on learning. In one of these sessions, a teacher told parents about the kinds of jobs students may get in the future with the skills they learn at Karkhana. The teacher pointed out how the students they currently have are applying their knowledge in other areas and increasing their curiosity while doing it. The parents meanwhile were concerned with how their children would do on exams in school if they were focused on Karkhana. Shrestha says that this type of thinking is almost impossible to subdue because parents and Karkhana see success in different ways.

Despite the concerns of parents, Karkhana has seen a big increase in the number of students in attendance. Students currently attending want to keep coming back because they feel as if they are actually learning something. Karkhana’s successes have not gone unrecorded, according to Shrestha. Karkhana staff have many documents of data and research conducted by social scientists the group hires. They are using this to bring more attention in the public schools they often present at as well as other organizations, both inside and outside of Nepal. Shrestha says soon they will have enough support from sponsors to expand to other areas in Nepal and continue spreading their progressive pedagogy.
Rato Bangala

According to Timsana (2017), the Rato Bangala School in Kathmandu follows the Jean Piaget Model of Learning in which each stage of childhood is acknowledged and handled differently. For example, Timsana says that students in the earliest grades would focus on sensory education because children that young respond more to touch or smell. They would be given books that had different textures on each page so they could feel what animals or plants they were learning about. As they grew, Rato Bangala would introduce different concepts and topics not offered in most other schools around the area (Shrestha 2017). Akankshya Shrestha, another Rato Bangala alumni, recalled the unique, expansive way they were taught: they first learned about the concept of other and how society worked. In Grade 4 they began learning about Newari culture; in Grade 5 they expanded to other tribes and districts in Nepal; and as they continued their journey to secondary education, they learned more about the world along with different life skills (like finance). According to Shrestha, the way these concepts were introduced were done in a way that allowed her and the other students to truly understand what was being taught. When they learned about Newari culture for example, they got to attend different festivals and participate in Ma Puja. When they studied science they were assigned hands-on projects like building volcano models for geology or digging in front of the school for archaeology. When they read Shakespeare, the students acted out Macbeth for their parents in a school play.

One specific experience Timsana remembered was a new poetry class
introduced to the students during Grade 8. It focused on Nepali poetry and Timsana claims that its because of the class that she developed a fiercer appreciation for Nepali culture. The goal of the class was to do just that because according to Timsana, the teachers felt that the school was becoming “too westernized.”

According to Shrestha and Timsana, what Rato Bangala does best is instill a “lifelong learning” attitude among the students. They actually feel as if they are learning Shakespeare or archaeology because they have performed a play or dug up dirt. Despite this, Timsana says that she felt the experience was not worth the money. She claims that there was so much pressure to live up to the West, get a job in the West, study like the West. It was because of this “obsession” that Rato Bangala often forgets to keep its pace and reflect on the class at present and provide sufficient feedback to move forward. Instead, the teachers rush and while the students do well in examinations and projects, it was a stressful experience.

**Discussion**

The use of new pedagogies in improving education is a tactic that seems to be successful based on the observations, interactions, and verbal accounts of students and teachers. The research comprised of individuals from different schools and yet they remain consistent in continuing to support progressive education because students appear to respond extremely well to the new approaches to teaching based on the different standards of each
Define Quality

“Quality education” is a term I heard consistently throughout the research period and is necessary to define and expand on before proceeding. Prakash Bista, (2017) defines quality education as “education that helps fulfill the educational standards set by the government.” He believes students can easily pass these standards if they establish the right mindset and love for learning. Bista adds that quality education also means different things in the West and different things in the East. He talks about how different technologies and differently developed pedagogies in countries like the United States offer different standards and so there cannot be one universal definition for quality education.

Sabhyata Timsana (2017) believes quality education has to do with the attitude a school promotes in terms of learning. A high-quality school is one that allows students to critically think for the answer and instill upon them a curiosity for learning that, above all else, will help them succeed in examinations, projects, and life.

Other answers yield different answers, but essentially the core of all of them claim quality education to be one that is about perspective. When Dipeshwor Shrestha (2017) defines quality education, for example, he continually mentions the concept of “meaningful learning,” or taking one’s education outside of the classroom by adopting a mindset of “always
learning.” He says that as of now, the education system treats school as work -- what student is going to want to continue learning if this is the kind of perspective schools push out? By thinking of quality in terms of perspective, it makes sense as to why progressive education is favored, for this type of teaching is all about process over product (Conham 2016). If a student learns how to think, he or she is not limited to memory. Examinations and standards become stepping stones instead of destinations.

The Response From Parents

One of the dichotomies I found was the Lalu parents’ attitudes towards moving away traditional styles of education. This first presented itself first when I discovered that MMRS was moving away from physical punishment. According to Basyal (2017), parents were outraged and many repeatedly argue that a child will not learn if he or she is not hit at least once or twice. Timsana, who has studied education policy for two years, believes that parents are out-of-touch with the direction society is heading and refuse to move past the way they have been brought up. She says one of the conclusions she drew from her research was that the older Nepali generation did not have the concept of transition in childhood; as soon as they turned 7 or 8 years old, they were treated like adults and punished like adults. Akankshya Shrestha and Sabhyata Timsina recalled how in Rato Bangala, childhood is broken up into different stages of growth (adolescence, pre-teenager, teenager, young adult). Each stage of childhood is taught differently because of this notion of
“transition” that was introduced with progressive education and its focus on how students learn.

At MMRS, two Dartmouth graduate students volunteered and came to the conclusion that textbooks were unnecessary for the youth as almost none of them ever referred to them or remembered anything from them. This caused outrage among the parents who, despite being shown proof in the form of data collected by the volunteers, believed the volunteers’ intentions to solely be promotion of American ideals. Nirendra Bista (2017) told me how the parents in Lalu, including him, believe that Nepal is becoming too much like the West and the youth are losing pride in their home country.

This attitude is much less common in urban areas like Kathmandu, where parents seem to be indifferent and some even supportive; Akankshya Shrestha says her mother wants Shrestha to study in an American university because education in Nepal is a lost cause. Interactions with students and their parents at Karkhana yielded the same responses about the matter. However, this may very well be bias considering the parents were the ones that were sending their children to an extracurricular organization focused on progressive education in the first place.

These attitudes reflect the following; it seems that parents of students who send their children to government and public schools are generally indifferent towards or supportive of traditional education; other parents, who send their children to Karkhana or Rato Bangala are for it, but this may also be because that is how they felt before. Whether these progressive schools

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changed the general attitude can be determined by looking at whether students who attend progressive schools stay and if more students gradually join. According to Shrestha (2017), Karkhana has grown in size exponentially as both teacher and student numbers have increased. He showed me parent surveys created by Karkhana staff that prove that most families that enroll their students do so after hearing from other families about how refreshing Karkhana’s style of teaching was. It seems that perhaps parents for traditional schooling just need to be presented with clear and simple proof (like word-of-mouth) that these new pedagogies are good for the education system.

The reason MMRS may still have the conflict is because it is still in the early stages of developing its unique approach to teaching. Bista still faces hinderance from the government and therefore cannot fully attempt to reform education in Lalu. Parents only see this struggle and thus prefer the system that has always been in place.

This dichotomy may be doomed to always exist in Nepal; Basyal (2017) says that parents (at least in Lalu) will never change their minds when it comes to change. Education is just another discourse that is affected by the conservative attitude and the only way to make an impact is to reform despite what the parents or the government think and try to work around the system.

**The Idea of Success**

It appears that schools like MMRS, Karkhana, and Rato Bangala aim to measure progress and success by how a student works instead of the results
that work produces. Rato Bangala has students record their progress in folders and a big part of the final grade is based on these folders. Karkhana has at least one staff member observing and taking notes on a class and the dynamics of how students and teachers behave for feedback sessions later on. MMRS has teachers conversing with students one-on-one more so the teachers can take note on how much the student knows and what works best when engaging with him or her.

The problem is, opposing forces like the government and the attitudes of parents measure success in a different way. They rely on examinations and marks to tell if a student has really learned something. Bista, Shrestha, and Timsana have all acknowledged this and argue that this is the biggest limitation of public schools. Private schools and extracurricular groups (like Karkhana) have it easier because they set their own standards and often excel at them (Timsana 2017). Other schools on the other hand often have to shift back to the government’s preferred way of teaching towards exam time to pass.

It appears that the adoption of new methods of schooling is not simple; it is often experimental and instead of a full reformation, it is more of a mix with traditional teachings. Groups like Karkhana are not bound by governmental standards (as they are extracurricular) and thus may be the best solution if any true overhaul of pedagogy is to be implemented. Instead of creating a model school from within the system, as the BPEP aims to do (Dixit 2002), it appears, based on Karkhana’s lack of boundaries and their increasing
number of students, that perhaps creating a model school from outside the system may be the right tactic to show the government and the parents how progressive education can be more beneficial than a traditional education.

Conclusion

The widely-considered poor quality of education in Nepal is now being challenged by schools and organizations attempting to reform the system. The government’s past attempts at reformation have not been successful (Dixit 2002). Some schools and groups have taken matters into their own hands in an attempt for reformation. The ones chosen for my research, MMRS, Karkhana, and Rato Bangala are ones that focus on changing the system by adopting new pedagogies. Each have attempted to promote progressive education. But with the limits of government standards and the traditionalist attitudes of parents, this shift in education faces difficulty, each in different amounts. MMRS is a school in a known extremely poor and remote environment filled with citizens who are least likely to understand the need for progressivism because of their lack of knowledge about the outside world (Basyal 2017). The citizens are hesitant towards new types of schooling but still yet MMRS is recruiting volunteers, holding monthly information sessions for parents, and attempting to bend their government-approved curriculum so the students can learn in a different way. Karkhana, meanwhile, has met with much fewer obstacles because as an extracurricular group, it lies outside the education system and has built its own ecosystem in which teachers can promote “innovation,
experimentation, and discovery” (Shrestha 2017). It seems to be making an active impact on the parents and students as more and more continue to participate and attend classes.

The “new education movement” in Nepal is, of course, broader than MMRS and Karkhana. Other organizations like Global Partnership for Education and Reach out to Asia (ROTA), who are raising funds to support educational projects in Nepal and other countries, exist (Moore 2014). The government even included a Progressive Education Act in its latest Constitution, but its impact is unknown because of lack of evaluation (Timsana 2017).

MMRS and Karkhana are still growing and their impact is still left to be further evaluated. Their successes and failures are inconsistently defined because of different standards set by them and the government, but their influence is undeniable. As Dipendra Rae, a ten-year old student of Karkhana put it, they are bringing “cool to school.”
Glossary of Terms

Carrom - a board game in which players have to strike small disks into pockets in the corners of the board.

Khan Academy - a popular website that offers hundreds of videos on math, science, history, and dozens of other subjects.

Ma Puja - a Newari ceremony in which the self is worshipped.

MMRS - the Modern Model Residential School, the school in which I stayed at for a portion of the ISP period and is the focus of my research.
Figure 1 - SLC Failure Rates Graph: public/government failure rates remain consistently remain high.

Figure 2 - Lalu, Kalikot; the extremely poor and remote village that houses MMRS.
Figure 3 - MMRS; the room where I stayed at is hovering by the stairs and room where kids slept is on top left. The room in the top center is where the TV and computers are stored.

Figure 4 - Karkhana; the students get to work with tools and make their own projects. The tables are topped off with whiteboards so students can make blueprints and plans before they begin working.
Figure 5 - Karkhana Student: The student, after learning how LEDs work, created a lamp out of scraps she picked up in the tool room.
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List of Interviews

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## Fieldwork Log

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Email Address: faisalmmlalani@gmail.com

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Program and Term: SIT Nepal: Development and Social Change, Spring 2017

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