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**SOCIAL CHANGE AND EDUCATIONAL RETENTION IN NEPAL:
REFLECTIONS FROM AN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE**

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The papers by Sharma, Skinner, Beach, and Holmes bring historical, research, and programatic perspectives to an understanding of education and social change in Nepal. As an educational development specialist I would like to add the perspective of one who has worked many years in Nepal, most recently as technical advisor to the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC). I would like to take a major problem confronting educational planners in Nepal and reflect on this issue in light of some of the points raised in the papers.

The issue is retention, preventing primary children from dropping out of school after a few sporadic years of education. Although the papers generally address secondary education (grades six through ten), their attention to the social context of school raises points relevant to the problem of retention at the primary level, the focus of this discussion. Retention is a less serious problem at the secondary level and is complicated by a lack of consensus about how much and what is an "appropriate" secondary education. Retention is also a relatively recent issue. During the Rana period described in Sharma's paper, the struggle was basically to establish various schools on a limited basis. With schools now accessible to almost all children, His Majesty's Government has begun to address the effectiveness of the education system. This attention has revealed a high dropout rate and forced policy makers to identify ways to retain a greater proportion of Nepalese students who are of primary age (six to ten years).

In 1987, His Majesty's Government (HMG) established a policy to universalize primary education by the year 2000 AD. HMG is committed to enrolling all school-age children and assuring them five years of primary education. Since then, growth in primary school enrollment has been dramatic. Between 1987 and 1989, enrollment increased by about 14 percent per year, with girls' enrollment growing at a staggering rate of 23 percent per year. Currently, the gross enrollment rate, which includes children younger than six and older than ten, is 100% (Personal Communication, MOEL, 1990). The reasons for this dramatic expansion have not been fully analyzed, but several government programs have clearly had an impact. New primary schools have been opened, making schooling more accessible. Incentives such as scholarships for girls and an expanded free textbook program have made primary education more attractive.

Prior to this rapid expansion, student retention at the primary level was a serious problem. For every one hundred students entering first grade, rarely would more than thirty finish fifth grade, and many of these would have repeated at least one grade. The average length of primary schooling in the mid 80's was three to four years. Educators generally acknowledge that five years of schooling are essential for establishing basic literacy. A major question now facing policy makers is not only how to prevent a further erosion of retention rates with the expansion of enrollments but to improve retention rates so that all Nepalese children receive an education through the fifth grade. In fact, enrollment rates can only continue to grow by increasing retention rates since the pool of children who have never gone to school will shortly be depleted.

Skinner's paper suggests that children themselves "play an important role in whether or not they continue school." Through participation in school, students develop a sense of themselves as being special. Part of this specialness appears to encompass an alternative, non-traditional vision of their future. Their visions sustain them in the face of strong parental and economic pressures to become full-time members of the household work force. The power of students' sense of identity raises several interesting questions for educational policy makers. What characteristics of school create these

alternative visions which are so persuasive in keeping students in school: the curriculum, the peer environment, "school" as a social construction? For many children, though, schools may be merely an escape from the drudgery of household and farm labor. In this scenario, home life "pushes" children into school rather than the stimulation of school "pulling" children to its doors.

There are numerous reasons why primary-aged children might choose to stay in school. More immediately and tangibly than visions of the future, school provides a place for social interaction, a place for play, an escape from work. School offers children an excuse to escape from household responsibilities. The "pull" of schooling can be enhanced by providing an environment not found elsewhere in the community. Schools with books, pictures, games, sports equipment, even comfortable places to sit may be an irresistible lure for children.

As an educator, I would also hope that children would find learning, particularly the ability to decipher the written word and read books, an empowering experience. Learning happens with good teaching. Therefore, the quality of teaching must be an important factor in keeping students in school. The use of radio for direct instruction in primary schools, as proposed in Holmes' paper, addresses this issue of quality. Retention rates are lowest in poorer areas and in areas where literacy rates are low. Radio offers the potential of high quality, consistent instruction. The attraction of interesting, lively radio instruction should improve student attendance; it may even improve teacher attendance. Erratic teacher attendance, a problem in many schools, discourages student attendance. The daily presence of a "radio" teacher can enable students to pressure for instruction; a teacher has to be there to turn on the radio. In my experience teaching in Nepali schools, I found students always seeking teachers out to come to class (another example of the role students play in asserting their educational rights). Instructional radio may give students more "ammunition" with which to draw reluctant teachers into the classroom, and as such it has the potential to strongly influence the social environment of the school. I assume that as the quality of instruction and teacher attendance improves school will become a more appealing and rewarding place to spend time, thus increasing the "pull" to retain students.

Of concern to planners also needs to be the kind of future vision school helps children to create for themselves. If schooling is seen primarily as a way to escape rural life or avoid traditional responsibilities of motherhood, then schooling fails to serve the needs of the majority of the community and the nation as a whole. How can schooling help children develop identities that both encourage them to stay in school and yet remain more closely connected with their own communities? This is a problem which confronts educational policy makers battling the rural flight to urban areas. Unfortunately, the answer probably lies in the philosophy and economics of a nation's approach to development and well beyond the control of educators.

In considering the interaction of economics and education, Beach's paper suggests an interesting link between school and the emergence of non-farming alternatives within the local community. He notes that school attendance places economic demands on families, forcing them to search for sources of cash income. In the absence of other alternatives, this led to the establishment of numerous small shops by former students in the village of his research. In this case, schooling both created the demand for and provided the literate work force to undertake shop-keeping as a new occupation. As Nepal's transportation infrastructure improves and development activities extend to more parts of the country, it is likely that the repertoire of alternative, cash producing activities will expand. Here, then, may be alternative futures available through schooling but more relevant to the local community. These opportunities create an incentive to stay in school at least until basic literacy has been achieved by the end of fifth grade. There is a cautionary note raised in Beach's paper. Basic literacy and numeracy skills learned in school must be useful in the workplace. Beach's example of a student struggling with school math in the workplace can only lead to frustration and a possible refection of schooling.

Children themselves are central to the decision to "stay in" or "drop out" of school. Consequently, students' feelings about school must be attended to in efforts to design programs to increase retention rates. The provision of external incentives--scholarships, free textbooks, uniforms--needs to be complemented with programs to improve the quality of instruction and every day life in schools. Efforts to expand extra-curricular activities at the secondary level are helping to define a broader social role for schools, but problems of retention are much greater at the primary level. Educational planners need to design programs for making schools places where children want to be.