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Original Article

Community Bonding for Developing Life-Affirming Skills of Children: A Qualitative Case Study of Tole Reading Group in Kaski, Nepal



Indra Mani Rai (Yamphu)^a

Central Department of Education,
Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

^a Email: indrayamphuny@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0848-3735>



Ram Gaire^b

National Campaign for Education (NCE)-
Nepal

^b Email: gairejee@ncenepal.org.np

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9401-9578>



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Abstract

Based on a qualitative case study of a community reading group in a village of Kaski district, this paper explores how community bonding facilitates children's life-affirming skills. It argues that the networks based on communal values of reciprocal benefits are assets that promote sensitisation among themselves and the children's learning. A local teacher and a School Management Committee member from the community facilitate as mediators for bridging school and the community meaningfully. It highlights that community members' informal and autonomous engagement in the collective reading and learning of children is more sustainable than the rigid, structured, and controlled mechanisms. Further, the paper claims that the school as an isolated institution with imported global values may not fit in a particular community. Thus, it is essential to respect and value the community bonding with contextual values to bridge the school and community and enhance meaningful reading and learning activities and quality education.

Keywords: *Community; Values; Networks; Learning*

The Context

School is a closed system of fulfilling the educational needs of children in the community. The children learn universal or epochal values, knowledge, and behaviours in schools that help them affirm their lives in the modern world. The learning of this modern scientific knowledge and skills is different from that of cultural values, norms, knowledge, worldviews, beliefs, and skills that they learn in the

communities and families (Koirala, 2003). The modern schools have ignored, devalued, and marginalized the community values, knowledge, and skills (Semali, 1999). The prior concepts of knowledge, belief, worldviews, if ignored in a way that directly influences conceptual development and children often fail to comprehend what is taught due to irrelevancy (Snively & Corsiglia, 2001). However, school and community detachment has created difficulty for students in learning/conceptualizing

scientific concepts and ideas. The learning of modern knowledge systems is meaningful when instilled in communal knowledge and ways of knowing (Rai, 2018). By these facts, the notion of school and community relations is crucial for developing children's life-affirming skills. However, the family and community are less engaged in the children's learning, thereby inculcating the community's cultural values and knowledge systems. The school and community relationships are not so stronger. However, each of them is assumed to serve the interest of community people preparing children to live their later life in a better way.

It doesn't mean to say that there were no efforts to build relationships between schools and communities in Nepal's educational milieu. The intent is manifested through different ways of educating community people and enhancing their participation in schools. Particularly, the ideas and practices of adult or life-long learning as an integral part of life were surfaced through non-formal and informal learning to make parents and community people aware of values of education and support their children's learning meaningfully. However, the concept of adult

education, for the first time, was introduced through the first commission, Nepal National Education Planning Commission 1956 (Pandey et al., 1956). At that time, adult education was conceived as mere literacy, limiting teaching adults how to read and write. Gradually, the idea of literacy as genesis led to several programmes, including out of school programme through Community Learning Centres (CLCs), with one particular and implicit purpose of enabling parents to support their children's learning engagement.

The 'Non-Formal Education Programme', particularly the adult/women literacy programmes were/are under the policy framework of Non-Formal Education Policy 2007 (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2007). Despite all these educational programmes, parenting education is intended to develop school-community relationships. However, there were/are other practices of adult learning that was/is inspired by Freire (1993) to educate the people through developing critical self-reflective views on their structural oppression and domination conducted by International/Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs). On the other hand, the School Management Committees (SMCs) and

Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), which have been conceived as mechanisms for the participation of parents, are less instrumental in ensuring the meaningful participation the parents (Education Review Office, 2019). Thus, school-community relationships are not so stronger in the context of Nepal. These two entities are often delinked state, which has been disadvantageous to promote quality education.

With these views, the GoN (2016) has developed School Sector Development Plan (SSDP 2016-2023) as a sectoral plan of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all the students. The plan envisions the strengthening of the active participation of parents and the community in schools. The purpose is to enhance education quality through their support and facilitation of their children in learning. Nevertheless, in many cases, parental and community participation seems weaker in Nepal's community schools due to their poverty with a compulsion to engage in domestic work burdens (USAID/RTI, 2020). Realising this, the GoN implemented the Early Grade Reading Programme (EGRP) for two years (from 2016 to 2018) in

sixteen districts of Nepal under USAID's technical and financial support to enhance parents' and communities' participation in children's reading and learning activities.

Under this programme, informal/loose groups (Tole Reading Groups) of parents of early grades (1-3) were formed in the catchment areas of community schools to conduct different activities (reading festival, reading competition, the establishment of reading corners, group reading activities in the community, development of local reading materials) of reading in the community and schools. The purpose was to develop collaboration between schools and communities to enhance quality education. It has been felt that the programme has brought positive changes in particular contexts (USAID/RTI, 2020). In this context, this paper's research delves into how the community bonding and bridging bond social capital supported collaborative work for group reading and learning of children in the community and developing a relationship with the school. Further, this case study explores the development of children's life-affirming skills by the collaborative effort of community and school in a particular Tole Reading Group of a

specific location of Kaski district in Nepal.

Methodology

This study for this paper used a qualitative case study approach (Yazan, 2015) to explore the school and community members' perspectives and practices for building nexus between the school and community to develop children's life skills. The research approach was appropriate to understand the phenomena through the narratives of the actors. The approach facilitated drawing the participants' experiences who were actively involved in activities of developing the children's life skills. This approach also uncovered the experiences and interpretations of the research participants.

This study's case was Seti Tole Reading Group (STRG) in the catchment area of Bal Basic School, at a village of Pokhara Metropolitan City-24, Kaski. The case was chosen as it was one of the high-performing TRG (based on the recommendation of USAID/RTI) under the EGRP of the GoN under the technical and financial assistance of USAID. The school is located almost at the top of the village, about 15 km North-West of Pokhara city. It is the

oldest school established in 2015 BS with five permanent teachers (3 males and 2 females) and only 35 students. The classrooms were decorated with learning materials provided by EGRP and charts and figures developed by students. Many students have already been transferred to private schools in Pokhara and elsewhere due to transportation facilities. There are about 125 households in the village. It is a mixed community of *Brahmin*, *Chhetri*, *Dalits*, and a few other *Janajatis*. Most households have agriculture as the main occupation, and most men are abroad for wage labouring in Gulf countries. Thus, women have fuller responsibilities of home management, including the education of their children.

For engaging in such a context, the guidelines of open interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and observation with open-ended questions were developed. The tools were used to explore the personal and collective experiences and practices of parents. The major participants were SMC Chair/member, STRG coordinator and members, headteacher, teachers, and parents. These participants were selected purposefully based on their experiences and contribution to building

relationships between the school and the community. Multiple data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and observation, were used to triangulate the information (Yazan, 2015). In-depth interviews supported exploring the individual experiences, feeling, and perception, whereas the FGD allowed exploring the collective views (which were either contrasting or consensual). Further, the field observation facilitated to get a sense of the realities through their behaviour and activities in STRG. The collected data recordings were transcribed and followed the sequential process of coding, categorizing, and thematising (Creswell, 2012). Moreover, the contextual description and the data as significant statements were presented as evidence presented under each theme. Further, the meaning was attached to the data was further analysed with theoretical ideas.

Functionality of Seti Tole Reading Group

Seti Tole Reading Group was formed in 2016 under the EGRP programme of the GoN with 13 community members in a Bal Basic School community to conduct different activities of bridging the

school and community. The members continuously met to discuss and plan for their children's reading activities at home and school. The group was operationalized more formally and systematically with timely meetings and written decisions, plans, and strategies. The group members were involved in different school programmes such as Parent-Teacher Conference, Mobile Reading Corner, Reading Festival, and Reading Competition. They also engaged in peer education (educating one from another informed of the newer ideas and practices in the community) and developing local reading materials as they were trained for the activities.

After the programme phased out at the end of 2018, the group was shrunk into a small homogenous community of *Dalits* about 25 minutes of the walking distance down from the school as most of their children were in the school. However, the group has almost left to conduct most of the activities (mentioned above) except group reading activities of children due to lack of resources. No other community-based organizations, including local government, support it anything except the support of reading materials of Bal Basic School. The group has seven members active in a loose form.

Further, the children are collected in their free time in the morning and sometimes in the evening, weekly holidays, and long vacations. There are 11 children from grade I to IV who are collected in out of school time at Radhika's house (Coordinator of STRG). The coordinator of the group noted;

I usually tell them to study and even listen to them. Children jump and play. They study happily. They enjoy and become happy studying here. If one reads and the other listens. Sometimes, I tell stories, and they listen and ask questions. Sometimes, they discuss and present their agreement or disagreements.

Radhika is the eldest in the community as that of community chieftain. All other members of the community respect her. Radhika's two-roomed house with a tinned roof is clean and is at the centre of the community. It has a small corridor in front and a tiled courtyard. Usually, she engages more in reading children as she feels more responsible for her as a community senior. She provides mats and other sitting materials and sometimes tiffin to the children as they are from her own relatives. She gives warm clothes to the

children who feel cold. She loves the children and encourages them all the time to read. She allows children to sit in the courtyard when they need sunlight and in the corridor when it rains and sunny days. The children sometimes sit for reading inside the house, even in the sleeping room when they need light in the evening or too cold. The children sit and read anywhere they like in the sitting or sleeping rooms. EGRP has provided different reading materials that the students read in turn, and sometimes they read their textbooks. Sometimes, they tell stories, and sometimes they engage in drawing and other times doing home assignments of school.

Thus, the function of STRG has been shifted from more formal to more informal ways as the members decide as to their collective desire. Almost all the household members of the community work as a responsible member of the group. They don't have any written documentation of their works. They don't maintain any written decisions like that of minutes in a more formal manner. They decide orally and practice collaboratively and collectively. For example, the members of STRG have made informal decision to take a turn to take care of the group of children as all

of them could not attend the group regularly due to in/outdoor domestic works. This is the support of each other with obligation and expectation for fulfilling the need of each other (Hermans & Lederer, 2009). This is their informal agreement and based on an understanding of themselves. Further, they have decided that the box's key with reading materials (provided by EGRP) is handed to the member who takes the turn next time. They have decided to include the children from Grade 1 to 4 (as EGRP focused on Grades 1-3) in the group reading activities. Thus, it was their autonomy to decide as they feel necessary for reading improvement and learning.

The members of STRG meet at the home of Radhika (Coordinator of STRG) twice or once in a month or sometimes weekly and discuss the reading and learning progress of their children informally. They do not have fixed and regular dates for the meeting. They have left keeping a minute, but they meet to discuss the reading of their children. They discuss informally in the usual way of day to day interaction. The group has no control of any other structures, nor is it a rigid body in terms of functioning rather, it is more flexible, informal, and autonomous that it has

been working as their desire to make their children good in reading and learning. Engagement in STRG has become habituated actions or culture for the members and children. Thus, STRG is sustaining children's reading activity informally and autonomously in the community as its members had networked with each other.

Community Bonding for Collective Works

The members of Seti TRG have stronger relationships. It is a more cohesive and harmonious community tied to each other with kinship values. Thus, due to emotional attachment among the community members and their children, the members who are in turn take good care of their children. They have a sense of ownness and belonging. They got informed and empowered by EGRP. Punam is a member of STRG and also an SMC member who said, “*We are as one when one gets informed the newer ideas inform others in the community. You told us these all today; we talk in the community today evening.*” Due to community networks or connection with warmer relationships, one empowered those who were in links. This was social

capital supported them for informal learning for empowerment (Parts, 2003), enhancing participation in children's reading activities. One participant of FGD shared,

There are twelve households in our community. Almost all of us are close kin with the same surname "B.K.," but one member out of 7 in the group is different from our close circle of relatives. She is from Khatri Chhetri group. But, she is like our community member. There is no discriminatory behaviour among us. We drink water from the same tap. We think those children are our own. So, we help and care for them in any way possible.

It comes to know that the members of STRG have obligations and expectations of support for future needs. Each favours and trusts others for reciprocating the benefits by taking turns of caring for the group of children. The strategy they used for benefitting and sustaining STRG was due to their communal and kinship ties. Such obligatory and expected actions generated further possible activities to get helped for the self and others. Thus, it was a network among the community member for benefitting each other. The

supports for each other were lubricating the warm relationships among the members of the community.

The network among the community members was not just artificial with the rationality of getting benefitted all the time; instead, it was warmer and communal with kinship relations (Day, 2006). The community network was a force that generated the opportunity of reading and learning of the children. Due to the community connection with a sense of belongingness in a group, they promoted children's life skills. If there could be weaker social relationships among the members with a little trust, it would be fewer chances of exchanging benefits (Lin, 2001). Arguably, the members had connections with other members with a sense of solidarity and feeling obligated towards one other (Day, 2006). The collectiveness helped them to find ways of improving the reading and learning habits of their children.

Thus, the nature of rural people with communitarian feeling rather than rational individualism served as an asset for changing the children with life-affirming skills. This was a genuine form of working together, which led to the coordinated actions for the common

goal of working together for children. The community ties gave rise to a force to generate other assets of connectivity. The nature of networks or relationships among the STRG members was bonding social capital (Putman, 2000), which facilitated them to participate in collective work of reading their children. It was “a social glue” that attached the members (Brough et al., 2006, p. 407) and created tight inward-looking networks among themselves for pursuing their strategic goal (McConkey & Mariga, 2011) of making children better in reading. The bonding social capital formed due to a sense of belonging and solidarity was a force to build a connection with the school.

Bridged School and Community

The stronger solidarity among the community members supported to build the linkage of school and community. The school and community were interrelated and interdependent. The STRG members and headteacher tightened the relations as they were local and had ownership of the school. Kabita, a permanent Nepali teacher and completed Master’s in Education (M. Ed.) in Nepali, is one of the

community's role models only studied the highest in terms of formal qualification. She studied in the same school (Bal Basic School). She feels the school of her own and supports children in learning as she is the only formally educated one in the family and community. Other community members also expect the same from her. She facilitates children in reading not only when they gather in the Seti Tole Reading Group (STRG), rather she takes care of the children on the way home and school. Further, she reports to the parents about the children's behaviour and learning in school. She conveys the need and interest of the parents or learning behaviour of the children in school administration. Thus, role model Kabita as a local teacher has facilitated the bridge of the school and families and the community contributing to promoting the children's reading and learning. She said;

I often go there (where children read in a group) to support reading. Sometimes, I ask them to read books turn by turn; sometimes, they do home-works and sometimes engage in drawing. I facilitate them when they feel difficulties. Sometimes, we tell stories and poems. The children have already finished the reading

materials of the box (provided by EGRP). Nowadays, they are reading new books. We have taken some of these books from school provided by EGRP for school. The children are happy to read new books.

Despite her contribution to reading and learning of children in the community, Kabita also supported getting newer reading books from the school library. She has a good relationship with the headteacher. The headteacher was also supportive of the activities of the reading group. He regularly encouraged the group members, and sometimes he monitored the reading activities of children. The headteacher said,

EGRP has provided new books to the school, some of which are given to STRG as they asked for additional reading materials. Besides, the SMC has decided to support continuously to TRG. Accordingly, we have put a reading competition in our annual plan.

The headteacher is positive and committed to supporting the TRG. The school has also owned the activity of STRG, particularly the reading competition. This was because Punam, an SMC member, and STRG member,

played a vital role in deciding to continue the activities of STRG at school. Punam also connects the school and community, conveying the interest of the community and school. She is an active member. She never misses the SMC meetings. She conveys messages of SMC activities and decisions among the community members. She also puts agendas of children's learning and reading activities in the SMC. She involves in supervising and monitoring the school as per the decision made by the SMC. In addition, she involves actively in the reading activities of the children in the community. She contributed to provide newer reading materials provided by EGRP to STRG children as it was informally decided in the SMC.

Punam has multiple roles of bridging the STRG and School as a whole, particularly the SMC, with active engagement. The connectivity created by her is a milestone for continuing the reading activities of STRG. Thus, Kabita and Punam were bridging the community and school for developing the life-affirming skills of children. The STRG has developed a bridging social capital as a force for obtaining school resources (Hermans & Lederer, 2009). The linkage of school and community

was instrumental in generating information making aware of school and community each other's reading practices. Kabita and Punam were information channels as they participated in multiple social groups (school and community). The relation between the school and community-led to productive results of developing the life skills of children. The connection among the members of STRG was emotional and sentimental (that was discussed in the earlier section), which generated further social capital that was bridging social capital with school and EGRP. This was the connectivity obtained from participation in heterogeneous, external looking, and more loosely tied social networks generated from 'broader identities and reciprocity' (Putnam, 2000, p. 20). The bridging bond social capital enabled them to cross the community groups getting benefits of learning resources.

Life-Affirming Skills of Children

The STRG got support from the school but not from other community-based organizations as it was linked by the local teacher and SMC member to access learning resources. As a local

teacher, the headteacher was also more enthusiastic about supporting STRG through continuous encouragement and monitoring. Thus, the network of the STRG within and outside its context was instrumental for developing the life-affirming skills of children. The parents of Seti TRG felt that the children have remarkably improved different skills from this collective engagement. The FGD members collectively shared,

Children usually have learned through stories, poems, arts, and sketches. When we read stories to the kids, they listen carefully and learn. Initially, the kids were not much sharp in the study, but now there is a remarkable improvement in their reading ability. Unlike past times, children no longer ran to play after school, rather they do home works regularly. Children even bring the books they like from the school library and study here. They recite poems and read stories in front of their parents. They question each other and put their own views. We listen carefully and provide feedback if they do wrong.

It was understood that the children had developed reading and learning skills in

the group. They were found to have developed an essential life skill of working with team members and classmates regardless of culture and class (Trilling & Fabel, 2009). They have developed the life skill of "asking and answering important questions, communicating and working with others in learning, and creating new knowledge" (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). They engaged in creating arts such as drawings, poems, stories, and sketches. Further, the children were likely to develop the skills of engaged listening to others' ideas. Also, engaging students in collective reading activities promoted the skills of expressing agreements or disagreements. It was likely to support developing the critical thinking skills of the children. Kabita, a permanent Nepali teacher of Bal Basic School, is from the same community said;

The children from this TRG are smarter than others. In reading competition in school, the children from here all the time take the first position. They are doing good in the examination of school too. Thus, they improved when we started to take care of group learning and read in the community.

There were collaborative reading and learning practices of children. The children discussed their ideas with each other and raised questions with each other. From the constructivist perspective, the children were engaged in interaction by sharing, comparing, and debating ideas from the children and parents (Dagar & Yadav, 2016). The parents who took care of a group of children were supportive guides for the children's learning to understand the ideas. Children's learning was happened in their own community cultural context, promoting the meaningfulness of ideas they learned from the reading materials. The parents facilitated the learning of children through motivation and encouragement in the group. They had promoted children-centred and collaborative learning in which the learning was supported by continuous scaffolding (Dagar & Yadav, 2016). Moreover, the children had opportunities to discuss their alternative ways of thinking and sharing their opinions.

Conclusion

It came to be known that the operationalization of group activities of reading and learning based on community values such as informality,

flexibility, and autonomy are more powerful ways of generating positive results of learning of the children. More structured, rigid, controlled, formal, and guided group activities in the community are less aligned to the people's needs and interests. In this sense, the EGRP was effective, at least in this case, to the extent that the community could own the group reading activity of children with perceived development of life-affirming skills of reading and learning. The ideas and practices could be replicated in other contexts with a particular focus on respecting the specific community values appropriate for collective engagement in reading and learning.

The community network developed over time among the parents with sentiment and emotionality of being togetherness is a collective force for developing children's life-affirming skills. Community connectivity is also instrumental in developing a relationship with a modern school to obtain learning resources as support. The school and community relations remain stronger when community bonding is respected and valued for getting help for school practices. Community values that are often less aligned with rigid and structured

modern schooling could place it alienated. However, community bonding as social capital can be converted into building a relationship between school and community. It is difficult to align the formal values of modern schools in the community; rather, the schools should be aligned with the community values for effective functioning.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that no potential conflict of interest exists.

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Author Biosketch

Indra Mani Rai (Yamphu) is a Lecturer at Tribhuvan University, Central Department of Education, Kathmandu, Nepal. He earned his PhD from Kathmandu University on Identity Paradoxes of Kirat Migrants in Urban Context. He facilitates the courses ‘Foundations of Education’, ‘Research Methodology’, and ‘Education and Development’ at Master of Education (M. Ed.) level and ‘Diversity in Education’ at Master of Philosophy (MPhil) level. He has supervised more than two dozens of MPhil and Master dissertations at Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University. He has several research publications in national and international journals. He has attended several national and international academic conferences.

Ram Gaire has completed Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in Development Studies from Kathmandu University School of Education, Nepal. He has been working as the Program Manager in National Campaign for Education Nepal for 7 years. He has more than 13 years of experience on social movement particularly in education of deprived and marginalized communities. He has long experiences on Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and policy analysis. Further, he has presented papers in several national and international conferences and regional meetings. He is a member of the Board of Global Campaign for Education.

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