

The Language of Learning:  
A Look at Teaching Methods in Four Rasuwa–Tamang Schools

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## Abstract

In many hill villages in Nepal, children don't learn Nepali until they start going to school — which, given that school has traditionally been exclusively in Nepali, makes it much harder for them to start learning. The government has recently started piloting a program to teach in local languages, which officials claim helps students participate more in class and move teachers away from traditional rote-learning teaching methods. In observations in Rasuwa, this claim seemed questionable. Some teachers are good and some are not; Tamang-speaking has little to do with it. Furthermore, in the villages where children don't speak much Nepali, there are so many other problems associated with poverty that approaching this one seems, unfortunately, to have made little difference.

## Transliteration, Translation, and Quotations

The Nepali (नेपाली) language uses the देवनागरी (Devanagari) script, which does not have a good exact correspondence to the Roman alphabet used by English. Although this paper is not heavy on Nepali terminology, when it comes up I generally will include three things, one or two of which will be in a footnote: the English translation, a Roman transliteration, and the देवनागरी. Sometimes, if it is not particularly relevant, I will omit the transliteration.

When giving quotations from teachers, students, or community members, I will almost always be translating from the Nepali original; in a few cases, I may give a tentative translation of something very simple said in Tamang (based on the few words I picked up and context). In these cases, I will not give the Nepali original, for expediency's sake. Quotations from education officials or literature will sometimes be translations from Nepali, sometimes direct quotations from English — in which case I might take more liberties than I normally would in “cleaning up” language that may sound stilted or incorrect in the context of American English. In any case, although the words may not be exactly what was said, the sense will always be as identical as I am capable of rendering it.

The schools and locations in this study are not de-identified in any way; the tiny size of this pilot program means that anyone who cared would still be able to figure out which schools I was talking about without any great effort. I have, however, refrained from referring to teachers or students by name.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to everyone, in Kathmandu, Dhunche, and the villages, who let me ask them dumb questions in faltering Nepali, sit in on their classes, and stay in their homes. This report may not always be entirely flattering to them, but even so, they were very willing and greatly helpful in helping me to produce it. Just as importantly, this project, for what it is, would have been utterly impossible without the support of everyone at the Pitzer College in Nepal program: administrative staff, language teachers, the wonderful kitchen and other support staff, lecturers, the various host families, and of course the other students. Lastly, I should thank Dr. Ganesh Sing, who gave my project some much-needed guidance when I planned to tackle material that would have made for an ambitious Ph.D. thesis.

## A Note on the Nepali Educational System

The Nepali school system, in its current state (there is talk of revising it to be more like the American system) consists of three levels: primary (grades 1–5), lower secondary (6–8), and upper secondary (9–10). Afterwards comes the I.A. degree (grades 11 and 12), then a 3-year B.A. or similar degree. We will be concerned exclusively with the primary system. In private schools, there is frequently a nursery level, but in the villages I visited there were no private schools. (Shree Narayansthan is in the process of creating a “class  $1/2$ ,” but it had not been implemented yet at the time of my visit.)

Nepalis refer to what Americans call a “grade” as a “class,” so that students study in class one, then class two, and so on. I will use the terms interchangeably. In general, at least in village schools, a given school has only one section per class, so the terminology is not as confusing as one might expect. Students typically begin in class one between the ages of four and six.

Unlike in American primary schools, students from class one onwards remain in the same room all day while different teachers come to them to teach different subjects. There is a schedule for when this happens: the first chunk of time might be math with one teacher, then Nepali with another. Teachers move from grade to grade; they generally teach maybe three different subjects over the course of the day. Usually speaking, there are (supposed to be) as many teachers as different grades, so that each teacher is teaching at any given moment, except for the lunch/tea break in the middle of the day, when all classes stop. The schedule is the same from day to day.

# Background

Nestled between the enormous nations of India and China, Nepal is only slightly larger than Arkansas, yet within its borders lie everything from elephant- and crocodile-inhabited jungles at elevations as low as 230 feet to the Himalayas, land of yaks, snow leopards, and the yeti, with the peak of Mount Everest at 29,000 feet. Mirroring this biological and geographical diversity is great cultural and linguistic diversity: the nation is home to well over a hundred living languages and at least as many distinct ethnic groups, each with their own rich traditions (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009; Turin, 2005). These indigenous languages<sup>1</sup> range wildly in kind: a wide variety of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken, as well as a handful of Dravidian and Munda languages, primarily in the southeast.

In many parts of Nepal, particularly rural areas outside the Kathmandu Valley, Nepali, the national language, is barely spoken in the home or around the village. In these communities, Nepali is typically used only for interactions with outsiders or in official, governmental contexts, including school. Because it isn't used that often, in many villages, children don't have much of an opportunity to learn Nepali before beginning school.

These areas are also typically already some of the most educationally disadvantaged — there are few sources of income in such areas, and Buchmann and Hannum (2001) cite research which examined 35 countries and found the largest “wealth gaps” in educational attainment in South Asia. Children frequently are unable to attend school because they have to work

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<sup>1</sup>The word *indigenous*, as used in Nepal, has little to do with nativity. After all, activists refer to Nepali as non-indigenous but Sherpa as indigenous, while in fact Sherpas migrated from Tibet well after Brahmans and Chhetris made their way into the hills of Nepal. Rather, it has come to mean something more along the lines of “disadvantaged” (Turin, 2007). Despite this, I will use “indigenous” in the same way, because of its common usage in the literature.

in the fields or tend to the livestock, or because the rains have made the path to school even more treacherous; textbooks (like all outside materials) need to be carried in by porter and so sometimes just don't show up; there are often more classes than there are teachers, especially when teachers (as they are apt to do) don't come to school every day. Adding on the problem of learning in a language that the children don't really speak seems to make the task of education insurmountable, and yet almost since there has been a governmental school system to speak of, that has been exactly its policy.

## Language Policy

The study of a non-Nepali local tongue would mitigate against the effective development of Nepali, for the student would make greater use of it than Nepali – at home and in the community – and thus Nepali would remain a “foreign” language. If the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language, then other languages will gradually disappear, and greater national strength and unity will result (NNEPC, 1956, p. 97).

This was the feeling of the Nepal National Educational Planning Commission in 1956, the group chartered by the new government to set up a national educational system after the overthrow of the oppressive Rana regime.

There are many major problems with this kind of policy, with this kind of attitude. First of all, the hope that “other languages will gradually disappear” in an attempt to realize “greater national strength and unity” is repulsive in the context of modern pro-diversity sentiments and particularly to linguists. Awasthi (2005) discusses this as an attempt to copy the American model of education and, indeed, of society, the so-called “melting-pot” strategy of assimilation into the mass culture. The US was certainly looked at as a role model in Nepal at that period in time – in fact, the College of Education of which NNEPC was a part had just been founded by USAID, which was simultaneously eradicating malaria from the Terai and creating a modern telephone system in Kathmandu (USAID, 2007). Yet the United State's record of preserving indigenous cultures and languages is, speaking generously, lackluster at best. Whether it has succeeded in generating national unity as a whole is debatable, but although both countries are

full of very diverse ethnic groups, there are enough fundamental differences between the two that it would seem ill-advised for Nepal to attempt to follow in the US's footsteps. Perhaps most saliently, the US is a nation composed primarily of immigrants, who in coming were willing to leave their former nations and cultures behind to at least a certain extent. Nepal is a nation of ancient ethnic groups, which may have been immigrants millennia ago, but who are today not leaving their ancestral homes or cultures in any way.

The intent of NNEPC, however, is perhaps understandable: as of the nineteen-fifties, Nepal did not have much of a national identity, and the government was trying its best to create one. A nation of so many different ethnic groups and languages may have seemed untenable; and indeed, if everyone spoke only Nepali and shared a common culture, the goal of national unity would be almost trivial. This was indeed the explicit aim of the government, as evidenced by the (later) *panchayat* slogan “one language, one dress, one country.”<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, there is much to be said for having a common “link” language. Life would be much harder to work out if the Gurung potato farmer taking his goods to the city couldn't talk to the Tharu collecting his fare on the bus or the Newari merchant buying his crop. But this policy went far beyond merely attempting to establish such a link language. This was an attempt, argues Whelpton (2005), to impose the culture of the high-caste Parbatiya elite on all of the country (pp. 183–184).

Yet such drastic measures are not necessary merely to establish national unity, argues educational researcher Stephen May:

Such a position [that linguistic diversity is opposed to national cohesion] considerably understates the possibilities of holding dual or multiple identities...and yet it is clear that many of us can and do hold multiple and complimentary identities – social, political, and linguistic – at one and the same time (2001/2008, p. 6).

Diversity is one of the cornerstones of democracy, and so any truly democratic state must seek to reconcile individual and national identities.

Wiping out these languages, meanwhile, would cause more harm than most people might think. Moreover, Nepal is perhaps one of the worst places in the world for such minority

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<sup>2</sup>एक भाषा, एक भेश, एक देश: “ek bhaashaa, ek bshesh, ek desh.” (Whelpton, 2005, p. 183)

language-unfriendly policies to be in place, being one of the prime language-diversity hotspots in the world (Turin, 2005, p. 4). Harrison (2007) makes an impassioned argument for the preservation of endangered languages across the globe, summarized here in three points. First, an enormous amount of information about nature is encoded in local languages, knowledge which is harder to pass on to other generations in a “global” language. He cites Siberian reindeer classification as an example of something that will simply not be passed on, and so will be lost.<sup>3</sup> Another equally important, though perhaps less concrete, system of knowledge that will be lost is cultural heritage: oral histories, myths, traditional stories and sayings, and the like. Since most of the languages in danger of being lost have never been written down, entire cultures’ histories may simply disappear; and even if a given person self-identifies as a Nepali in addition to as a Sherpa, will he ever really identify with the creation myths of Brahman-Chetris as much as he would with the myths his Sherpa forefathers retold for centuries? Finally, losing access to languages means that linguists and cognitive scientists lose access to some key evidence in the great puzzle of how the mind works. Without knowledge of obscure languages which may exhibit a different kind of structure or a different way of expressing something, linguists’ attempts at broad theories will be necessarily incomplete and, in all likelihood, simply wrong (Harrison, 2007, pp. 15–19).

The politics of group identities, as formalized in Young (1990), have come to significant import among Nepali politicians and academics with the recent rise of Marxist and Maoist ideologies. This system also provides a strong argument for the right of people and peoples to speak their native language, including in governmental functions like the school system: a fundamental part of a group’s identity is necessarily the language that it speaks. Felizardo refutes the counter-argument that giving minorities the right to use their own language “beyond the private sphere” favors certain members of a nation over others:

Majorities already have the rights to use their languages in the public sphere, whereas minorities [do] not. Giving language rights to minorities gives them what they formerly

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<sup>3</sup>Turin (2005) has done work with the Thangmi language, spoken by about 30,000 people in the eastern reaches of Nepal, which “is a mine of unique indigenous terms for local flora and fauna that have medical and ritual value” (p. 5).

lacked in comparison to the ethnolinguistically larger groups, and in so doing remedies the preexisting lack of equality. One may go so far as to argue that language rights are essential for democratic participation (2009, p. 5).

Recognizing this, many groups of intellectuals and others from various ethnic groups promoted indigenous language use and lobbied the government after the fall of the Rana regime and during the time of *panchayat* “democracy,” including the Newar Language Council and the Nepal Mother-Tongue Council (नेपाल मात्रिभाषा परिषद), among others (Whelpton, 2005, p. 182–83).

The एक भाषा (“one language”) policy was perhaps always doomed to fail. Discussing its equivalent in the Andean states, Hornberger (2000) describes the “twin processes of globalization and ethnic fragmentation...[that] exert pressures on the one language–one nation ideal, from both without and within” (p. 177). Those states’ new constitutions have now abandoned this approach.

In Nepal as well, the right to use and preserve local languages has been recognized since the 1990 Constitution, which established a true constitutional monarchy with democratic elements: “Each community residing within the Kingdom of Nepal shall have the right to preserve and promote its language, script and culture” (*Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal*, 1990, 18.1). Written seventeen years later, the current<sup>4</sup> *Interim Constitution of Nepal* (2007, 17.3) reads nearly identically, removing the words “Kingdom of” (having abolished the monarchy) and adding “cultural civility and heritage” to the list of protected rights.

But this type of clause necessarily vague. That vagueness is what allows the courts to interpret it broadly, but in a nation like Nepal, where throughout most of the country the effect of national political discussions on everyday life seems to manifest itself exclusively in the form of *bandas*,<sup>5</sup> such a clause in the constitution does not necessarily mean the right to

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<sup>4</sup>At time of writing, in any case. A new constitution is being drafted by the Constituent Assembly; especially given the recent political turmoil, it seems far from done. It will almost certainly, however, include a similar clause.

<sup>5</sup>बन्द, literally *closing*. The supercharged Nepali version of a strike, where protestors shut down all road traffic – often including even bicycles – and usually stores as well in an attempt to draw attention to their cause. Although nowadays they are called for any reason at all, in general the bigger ones come about when large, often ethnicity-based, groups feel their rights have been violated, indicating the importance in Nepal of identity-based politics.

local languages will really come into play in everyday life.

## Language in Educational Policy

In an attempt to actually make that right manifest itself in everyday life, and also to solve a major issue of practicality — how are students who don't speak a word of Nepali before entering class one supposed to be able to learn anything? — the *Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal* (1990) included this clause:

Each community shall have the right to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children. (18.2)

The provision was modified slightly in the 2007 version:

Each community shall have the right to get basic education in their mother tongue as provided for in the law (*Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007, 17.1*).

Far more specifically, the Constitution here establishes a right to “basic education” in a community’s mother tongue. This is a classic example of what Ruiz (1984) calls the *language as right* “orientation” to language planning, as opposed to *language as problem* or *language as resource*. (On his scale of how advanced these approaches are, *language as right* falls in the middle.)

This provision has been in place since 1990. Only recently, however, has the government actually begun to do anything about it. There are two major programs relevant to mother tongue education. One is what the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) refers to as “mother tongue instruction”: that is, teaching a local language as content in the school. This comes under the auspices of the local curriculum program, where one-sixth of the total points, but at the lowest “weightage” (half as much as Nepali),<sup>6</sup> go to a local subject. The local subject is taught like any other class: every day, at least according to the schedule, for forty-five minutes. Typically, these local subjects are either a mother tongue or something else

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<sup>6</sup>In the exam-focused Nepali education system, the curriculum structure is laid out by the number of points allotted to it in the year-end exams which determine the entirety of a students’ grade. In the primary level, local subjects have a “weightage” of 4, while Nepali has 8, mathematics 6, and English 5.

related to the area. Dinesh Shrestha,<sup>7</sup> an official from the CDC, says that this is frequently used for teaching locally-relevant skills: in agricultural areas, the local curriculum often has to do with “vegetable-growing and that.” He suggested that in Pokhara<sup>8</sup>, the local curriculum might be about tourism, and that all schools could choose to teach local culture. (The extent to which this program has actually been effectively implemented is questionable at best; this, however, will be discussed later on.)

To support this program, the CDC has developed language-learning curricula and textbooks for twelve different languages (Department of Education Inclusive Education Section, 2008).

The other language-related project, which this report focuses on, is known as the “medium-of-instruction” program, where schools may elect to teach classes one through three in a local language. This is the program that best fulfills the mandate of the constitution to provide basic education in the mother tongue; this is the program that attempts to address actual learning needs of children from minority language groups.

The project has been in pilot with seven schools since 2007, and now (in 2009) is in the process of “expanding outward” from those schools to fourteen others: each pilot school is responsible for teaching two other nearby schools how to teach in the area’s mother tongue. Grade one and two textbooks have been translated in a few languages, but not in all the languages for which there exists a pilot school, and some textbooks have been translated into languages in which there is no pilot school.

It should be noted that the project provides for only classes one through three. In class four and five, the mother tongue is officially supposed to be spoken only during mother tongue instruction class, if the local school has elected to teach it; if the school instead teaches about potato farming, from class four on no mother tongue is supposed to be in school at all. After class six, the only language other than Nepali and English which is a part of the curriculum

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<sup>7</sup>दिनेश श्रेष्ठ

<sup>8</sup>One of the major tourist-destination cities in Nepal.

is optional Sanskrit.<sup>9</sup>

Both the project literature that I came in contact with and the education officials I spoke to cited the main reason for this project as the academic difficulties non-Nepali-speaking children face in an all-Nepali environment. The program brochure states it simply: “Non-Nepali speaking children have more academic difficulties when they have to study in a language that they don’t know well” (Department of Education Inclusive Education Section, 2008). The goal, as expressed by officials and the literature, is to improve “access to and quality of” education for children in minority-language groups.

This program, according to Shrestha (and others), aims to give students a few years to learn the very basics in classes one through three, meanwhile building up their Nepali skills in the Nepali period each day, so that when they get to class four, they will be ready for all-Nepali content.

This kind of transitional program is a classic example of *language-as-problem* orientation, as set out by Ruiz (1984). The *language-as-right* attitude of the Constitution, in Shrestha’s view, is addressed by the aforementioned mother-tongue-as-content local-curriculum provision. In that way, Shrestha says that this program is only a formalization of something that in fact already occurs frequently in practice. When kids don’t speak Nepali, teachers generally notice, and realize that they have to speak the local tongue to make themselves understood, he argued.

In this respect, the new medium-of-instruction program hardly represents a change from previous *de facto* policy at all. Even NNEPC (1956) was in favor of speaking local tongues to students when they simply do not understand; it just then advocated shifting to Nepali-only as quickly as possible, in order to eliminate local languages. This new policy certainly does not explicitly state any hopes that “other languages will gradually disappear,” and indeed its framers probably are in favor of linguistic diversity, at least in the broad theoretical sense. But is saying “locals only for three years and then Nepali only” really so different from saying

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<sup>9</sup>Sanskrit, the language from which Nepali descended, plays about the same role in mainstream Nepali society as did Latin in Catholic communities before the Church moved to the vernacular. In the hill and mountain villages I focused on, it plays about the same role as Latin does in a typical Native American reservation; accordingly, I would assume that few village secondary schools choose Sanskrit instead of “Civic and Moral Education” (Ministry of Education, 2009).

“locals for as short a time as you can get away with and then Nepali only”?

Perhaps. Although the difference is not as great as one would hope, explicitly encouraging teachers to use a local language might actually have some effect on the school space, creating an environment where local language use does not bear negative connotations, could promote student participation in the classroom. Although I never heard this kind of sentiment explicated by anyone – neither national- or district-level officials nor teachers mentioned it – it is kind of the symmetric argument to what everyone *did* say: that when students don’t really speak the medium of discourse, it is hard for them to do well in class.

Cazden (1973) makes another argument that teaching in a community’s mother tongue – even for a few years – can result in more effective instruction. She refers to examples of English-speaking children in Montreal being taught in French (successfully) and of Chicano and Navajo children being taught in the US in English (unsuccessfully). She, and the authors she cites, argue that the “differences are social”: the reason is that the children in Montreal are “members of a dominant group [learning] a nondominant language which has potentialities of dominance,” while the Chicano and Navajo children are members of a nondominant group being taught a dominant language. It is the latter case which applies to indigenous languages in Nepal.

Moreover, in Nepal’s rapidly changing society, having the government really recognize an ethnic group’s language (and through it, that group’s culture – which could also possibly be recognized directly, through a more effective version of the local curriculum program) would be a significant factor in legitimizing that group’s identity as a part of Nepal. “Non-Nepali speaking, non-caste Hindu ethnic groups have long felt excluded from full participation and recognition in the state by a homogenous vision of what it means to be Nepali,” says Turin (2007); were the Nepali government to show that it truly considers these groups as much a part of the nation as everyone else, by teaching their own language and culture in the schools, much more would be done for feelings of national unity than the **एक भाषा** strategy ever accomplished.

This program certainly does not take the preservation-oriented *language-as-resource* attitude expressed by Harrison (2007), nor the human-rights-minded *language-as-right* attitude found in the *Interim Constitution of Nepal* (2007). Bilingual education projects with those attitudes do exist. Hornberger (1987) describes a “maintenance” (as opposed to transitional; the local language, Quechua, is used for all subjects over a long period of time) bilingual education program in Peru which exhibits a *language-as-right* model. Using the rights-based approach does not make it any less effective in education; in fact, Hornberger describes the program as a great success, educationally speaking. She does cite some problems based on the mismatch between government-level policies (which moved from a resource approach to be firmly in the *language-as-problem* camp) and the program (which began in the *language-as-problem* orientation but moved quickly to the *language-as-right* approach), which caused the policy as a whole to fail, in her opinion, despite educational success. Freeman (1996), meanwhile, describes a two-way bilingual school in Washington D.C. — that is, the Spanish-speaking students learn English and the English-speakers learn Spanish. Although there were some implementation problems, the school functions quite well within its *language-as-resource* framework.

The program also has met considerable resistance from some members of “indigenous” communities with almost the opposite complaint. Shrestha and Singh (2005) both found parents to complain of mother-tongue instruction that students already learn their language at home and “it would be a waste of time if they have to learn mother tongue at school.” Parents seem to generally feel that if students don’t understand something in Nepali, using their mother tongue to explain the concept is acceptable, but “mother tongue to be used for medium of instruction and curricular materials was not so much favored by them” (Singh, 2005, pp. 18–19). Shrestha said that many parents were concerned that students learning in a local language would “fall behind” in their Nepali (and English) skills: since Nepali is needed for all kinds of daily transactions and both languages are needed for most work, children who don’t learn Nepali well in their early years of schooling will be at a disadvantage. Parents also

want their kids learning English, and so when English-medium schools are available, they are frequently quite popular: this is basically the opposite of mother-tongue instruction.

Results from similar programs in other countries, however, contradict what these parents felt — even those programs that, like this one, use “low-minded” *language-as-problem* approaches. Felizardo (2009) reports that students enrolled in a bilingual education program in the Philippines’ Lubuagan District consistently, from grade two onwards, performed at the top of their division, in English, Filipino, and mathematics (pp. 13–14). Although Hornberger (1987) was a qualitative study, it describes the Peruvian project as quite successful across all fronts: students became surprisingly literate in Quechua, skills that they were perhaps later able to transfer to Spanish.

Given these results from around the world, and even despite its lack of high-mindedness in aims and questions about whether it is really anything new, one would hope that this medium-of-instruction program could still accomplish something for the pupils in it. I decided to look into whether I could see any evidence of that, particularly in terms of one interesting claim that an official from the Department of Education’s Inclusive Education Section (which handles this and other programs) made:

“In [this program]...the classroom environment tends to be more interactive...students are not afraid to ask questions....Teachers in this program usually use less rote learning techniques and more interactive methods.”

This was very intriguing to me, given that almost everything I had seen about the educational system in Nepal (with the exception of one stellar but extremely expensive private school) was focused almost exclusively on rote learning: not in the stated goals in the front of textbooks and what the government says it tries to promote, but in the classroom all signs pointed towards memorization as the only skill at all valued by the system. (Not having sat in on any classrooms at that point, one example anecdote of signs I had seen is given in the next section.) In Peru, Hornberger (1987) found some evidence of this kind of effect: students were far more involved in class and teachers more likely to teach concepts, rather than assigning time-wasting exercises aimed at teaching facts (pp. 215–18).

In order to investigate these claims, I spent about three weeks sitting in on classes in the Rasuwa district, where two of the seven pilot schools are located. Rasuwa is a mostly Tamang district; the villages I visited were all majority Tamang, both ethnically and linguistically. More details on the location and on exactly what I was looking for are in the section entitled Research Methods, beginning on page 11.

The questions I chose to focus on, then, are as follows:

- What are the teaching methods in use in Tamang-majority schools in Rasuwa?
- Are these different between pilot and non-pilot schools?
- What role do the Tamang and Nepali languages play in each kind of school? How do they affect students' learning?

## **A Personal Note: Evolution of this Report**

Life in the Kathmandu Valley and life in the village are almost unimaginably different. I saw this for myself when, after spending the first two and a half months of my abroad program in the Valley and in tourist destinations, we went to Simigaau, a Sherpa/Tamang village eight hours' walk from the nearest road passable by car. Almost everything was different. People (those who didn't leave the village to work) spent all day in the fields or watching livestock. They were Buddhist, wore shoes inside, and went stretches of several days without eating *any* rice. Houses were different, family structures were different, the language was different. (Everyone, even small children, spoke Nepali, but only to outsiders or in school; and when they did, you could tell it wasn't their first language.) In some ways, it was hard to believe we were even in the same country.

I began to wonder how effective the village school in Simigaau could possibly be. I knew that Nepal had a national curriculum, and that sometimes teachers in hill villages are from far away, even the Terai. How could a teacher teach when he comes from a very different culture than that of the students, speaks a language that the students know imperfectly if at

all, and is using a curriculum intended to apply to everyone from Tharus and Medeshi<sup>10</sup> in the Terai to Newars in Kathmandu to Rai in remote middle-hill villages to Sherpa and Gurung in the upper hills and mountains? In previous education coursework I had done, articles like Nieto (1996) had convinced me that cultural “discontinuities” between the school structure and students could be crippling. I read more articles, like Ladson-Billings (1995), that further convinced me that cultural differences could be one of the biggest problems faced by the school system in a country as diverse as Nepal. And what could be a bigger cultural discontinuity than language?

I also grew interested in the way that language affects learning practices through an experience I had in my Chhetri host family outside of Kathmandu. My host *bahini* (बहिनी, younger sister) goes to a nearby private English-language school; classes are (she says) about half-English, half-Nepali, but all written materials are in English. She is nine years old, and in class four; she doesn’t actually know enough English to speak it, just enough to figure out what the problem is asking her. One day, I looked over her shoulder while she was doing her math homework. The problem she was doing at the time was simply “List all the prime numbers up to 50.” The way she was solving it was easy: copy the list out of the back of the book. I started asking her some questions, wondering whether she actually understood what she was doing. I asked her, “Is 51 prime?” She thought for a moment, then replied in the affirmative. When I pointed out that 17 times 3 is 51, she didn’t really say anything. Then I asked what should have been an easy one: “What about 102?” She answered, “I only know them up to a hundred.”

It quickly became clear that she had no idea a prime number actually was, she just knew the list of them up to 50, sort of. This is a girl who is number two in her class in a private school that shows all signs of being at least relatively good, by Nepali standards. Clearly, her entire schooling has focused on rote memorization; a few other encounters of this kind have made that clear to me (including one torturous one where I told her there were twelve inches

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<sup>10</sup>मेदेशी: immigrants from India.

in one foot, and then could not get her to understand how to convert in the other direction: she finally tellingly asked, “Should I multiply or add or what?”) Although there is no actual evidence here, my guess is that if she were learning and doing assignments in Nepali, it would be easier for her to actually grasp the concepts involved. By analogy, I became interested in whether learning in Tamang would make it easier for Tamang kids to learn concepts and indeed do anything in school besides rote memorization.

I had also been fascinated by the role that English plays in modern Nepal, from learning it in school to when Nepalis speak to one another in English to the effect it has on the Nepali language (do Nepalis say फ as the *f* sound, rather than as an aspirated *p* sound, more often now that फोन, “phone,” is written everywhere? Why are there so many signs in Devanagari but with English words, like मनि त्रान्स्फेर, “money transfer”?). If I could incorporate that in any way, I wanted to.

Originally, I planned to do a far-reaching analysis of these cultural discontinuities, in multiple villages (of the same ethnic group) and at all levels of schooling, including observations of teacher training and an analysis of the curriculum. I was quickly convinced, however, that this might be just a little bit infeasible, so when I learned of the medium-of-instruction pilot project I chose to focus on that: classes 1–3 (primarily 1 and 2), mainly in-school observations, and almost exclusively on the interaction between mother tongues and Nepali (the English taught at this level consists mostly of the alphabet).

I chose to go to Rasuwa for a few reasons. I already knew a little bit about what Tamang village culture would be like, having seen some of it in Simigaau (although I lived with a Sherpa family there). It offered the unique opportunity of being able to see two pilot schools in close proximity. And lastly, it was the easiest to deal with logistically, being a straight shot up from Kathmandu on the tourist bus, and not having to pass through the unstable Terai. Plus, it was too high up to have any mosquitos.

# Research Methods

Research was conducted primarily through qualitative in-classroom observations, over a period of approximately three weeks. At each of the four schools (to be discussed in a moment), I went to school for the entire day, from assembly in the morning until students left the grounds. For the most part, I merely sat in class and watched what occurred: how the teachers taught, what the students did while the teacher was teaching, how the teacher reacted to what students were doing, what the students did while there was no teacher around. I visited Shree Bhimsen for five days, Shree Pranse for three, Shree Narayansthan and Shree Saraswati for two each. (I would have evened them out more, but poor travel planning and holidays that I hadn't known about limited my options.)

I tried particularly to take note of how teachers and students used language, as set out in Florio-Ruane (1987). When did students speak in Tamang? How did teachers respond to that? What kinds of topics did teachers talk about in Tamang, what kinds in Nepali, and when did they switch? Did any “code-switching” go on? This analysis was made harder by the fact that my Nepali is limited and my Tamang nonexistent, but I found I was able to understand at least the basic idea of most of the Nepali being spoken and could often guess at the Tamang from context. Presumably, however, a researcher who understands Tamang might be able to get a deeper understanding of what goes on in the classroom.

I also conducted interviews (primarily of an informal nature) with teachers in local schools, and had conversations with various education officials, at the national and district levels. I had planned to talk to students about how they felt about which language school should be in, but although the students were mostly very friendly, they wanted to play, not to talk about

school. A more formal interview structure could have helped with that, if it didn't intimidate the kids, but I felt that was inappropriate in the context of these schools. Older students, who might have been more willing (and linguistically able) to talk to me, tended to be uneasy around the big scary foreigner, as I didn't sit in on their classes and so they were unused to my presence. As such, I was mostly unable to get any useful input from students.

Likewise, I had planned to conduct conversations with community members (parents and other people in the village); this proved difficult as well, however. I was attempting to build a relationship with the community, to the extent that was possible in the brief time I stayed in each village, and so generally avoided pushing my own research topics on them, instead asking about their lives and answering their questions about my own.

## **Effect on the Classroom**

I tried to minimize the effect that I had on the classroom in several ways. First of all, I spent long chunks of time in each classroom I visited: generally a significant portion or even the entirety of each day, for several days in a row. (I sometimes switched between class one and class two during the day; on a few occasions, I ventured to class three.) Hopefully, this helped students grow used to my presence.

When the classroom arrangement allowed for it, I did my best to sit behind the students, in the least visible position where I could still have a good view of what was going on. This was rarely possible, however, as students frequently sat in benches right against the back wall. In those cases, I tried to choose an unobtrusive location and stay there for a long period of time, just sitting, observing, and taking notes.

Especially at first, though, students were certainly very aware of my presence, being a tall American with the biggest notebook they had ever seen in their lives, and a pen instead of stubby pencils. (I was told repeatedly that the thing I wrote in was a book, not a notebook.) Sometimes they looked at me during class time and made faces or tried to play; while a teacher was present or they had an active assignment, I did my best to either do nothing or urge them

to get back to their work. During the many downtimes in which no teacher was around and the children were all playing, though, I generally felt free to play with them myself.

Although the effects were less striking, my presence likely also changed teachers' behaviors, at least a little. On the very first day, a teacher who was beginning Tamang-language class (ie class where the content was the Tamang language, in addition to being taught in Tamang) asked me whether she should speak in Nepali so that I would understand. I of course said no, she should act exactly as if I weren't there, but she and other teachers often looked at me while teaching and were clearly aware of my presence. They also frequently spoke to me afterwards, asking what I had written down and the like.

## The Field Sites

The district of Rasuwa is north of Kathmandu, in the upper hills and mountains. The majority of people living there, at least at low- and mid-altitudes, are Tamang;<sup>11</sup> the district is home to two relatively popular trekking routes: Langtang and Gosaikunda (a high-altitude lake which is a major Hindu pilgrimage site). The district capital, Dhunche (धुन्चे), frequently serves as the starting point for each of those treks; it also marks the beginning of Langtang National Park. The road through Dhunche comes from Kathmandu and continues on to points north and west; several buses run south each morning and arrive from Kathmandu in the afternoon and evening. Locals use these buses to go from one town to another when doing so is convenient, as well as to go back and forth from Kathmandu. Goods (everything from rice and chickens to steel tubing) are also frequently brought on these buses.

Two medium-of-instruction pilot schools are located on the road near Dhunche. Shree Bhimsen (श्री भिमसेन) is in Thulo Barkhu (ठुलो भर्खु), five kilometers north from Dhunche; Shree Saraswati (श्री सरस्वती) is in Thade (ठडे), eight kilometers south of Dhunche. The difference between being north of Dhunche and south of Dhunche is actually quite important.

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<sup>11</sup>The Tamang people are one of the main ethnic groups of Nepal, living primarily in the hills and mountains of the central-northern part of the country. They originally migrated from Tibet, and their language (also called Tamang) falls in the Tibeto-Burman language group.

For comparison's sake, I also visited two traditional schools, about twenty kilometers south on the road (and so at a somewhat lower elevation). The schools, Shree Narayansthan (श्री नारायणस्थान) and Shree Pranse (श्री प्राङसे) are located very near each other, in a village called Gombodada (गोम्बोडाँडा) and slightly uphill in a town called Pranse (प्राङसे), respectively.

## Thulo Barkhu

In Thulo Barkhu, many trekkers pass through on their way up to Langtang and sometimes to Gosaikunda (though that route is a little out of the way). Accordingly, there are three somewhat large trekking hotels and a few other restaurants and stores, an organic farm that takes Western volunteers, and a children's resource library where Western volunteers read books to local kids, paint with them, and the like. Many locals do park-related work in Dhunche, there are a significant number of motorcycles, and one of the hotels' owners sends his children to English-language school in Dhunche. Most families have a few fields (of potato, corn, wheat, or millet) and a गोठ (pronounced like *goat*; animal shed) or two for their livestock. The town has maybe fifty households. Tamang is certainly the primary language of discourse around town, but even small children generally speak Nepali relatively well, probably due to the high level of contact with outsiders.<sup>12</sup> Teachers in Thade told me that Thulo Barkhu was a rich and well-educated town by the area's standards, with "good parents" in terms of promoting a good school environment.

Shree Bhimsen, in Thulo Barkhu, is just outside of town, set up on a small hill. It consists of three two-room buildings, one of which has a large office on the second story, set around a field where the children play and do their assembly in the morning. It teaches classes one through six and has six teachers, all relatively young. Four are local Tamang women, one is a man from the Terai, and the headmaster is a man from the hills. The latter two speak only

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<sup>12</sup>As with most Tamang children that I encountered, they had difficulty in using certain conjugations and especially with using the proper level of formality in pronouns. Nepali has three different pronouns meaning "you," used for different levels of formality (as with French's *tu* and *vous*); Tamang, like English, uses only one word for all formalities, both singular and plural, in the second person. As such, class one students frequently referred to me in the extremely informal तँ form, which I found far more rude than I expected myself to.

the Tamang they have picked up in the few years they have lived in Rasuwa, which is enough to count and do minor classroom-management tasks (“finished?,” “sit down,” and the like), but not really enough to hold a conversation. There are a little over a hundred students on the rolls at Bhimsen; on a typical day, seventy-five or eighty come.

## **Thade**

Thade, on the other hand, is a poor farming town. There is one restaurant, which also serves as a hotel that receives a handful of visitors a year. Other than that restaurant, there is one family who operates a small shop, the school, homes, and a small *ghumba* (Buddhist prayer site), with fields and गोट्स above and below the town – some as much as an hour’s walk distant. Young men generally leave to go to Kathmandu, or sometimes abroad, for work; a little bit of construction work and the like is available locally. Buses pass through on their way to or from Dhunche, but generally nobody gets on or off. The town is a little smaller than Thulo Barkhu, maybe thirty houses or so. Tamang is spoken almost exclusively around town, and young children generally do not speak any Nepali at all: many children who appeared to be around four or five stared blankly when I asked their name in Nepali. (By seven or eight, they all seem to speak it well.)

Shree Saraswati is at the uphill end of town, and has two large buildings with a total of maybe seven classrooms, a large office, and a covered area for assembly and playtime. It teaches through class six but has only five permanent teachers, which is an enormous problem for the school. In response, the school has combined classes one and two into the same room, to (as we will see) disastrous effects. This was the only school I observed that did not have a blackboard in every classroom. One teacher is a Newar from a neighboring district; the rest are Tamangs from Rasuwa, although none is actually from Thade. Most of the teachers live in Dhunche and commute to Thade (by motorcycle or bus) every day. Almost none of the children, even the older ones, wear school dress, which is unthinkable in most places in Nepal. Shree Saraswati has about as many students as Thulo Barkhu.

## Gombodada

Gombodada is about twenty-five kilometers south of Dhunche, just up the road from a town called Kalikasthan. Although Gombodada is itself mostly a Tamang town, ethnically and linguistically, Kalikasthan is mostly Brahman-Chhetri and Nepali-speaking. This proximity means that Nepali is more prevalent in the town; even small children generally speak it. The majority of fields and livestock are farther from town, but at least in what I saw children seemed to be less likely to do significant amounts of fieldwork than they are elsewhere, with the older generations taking care of most of that. (This may have been limited to the extended family that I stayed with, however; I did not investigate very thoroughly.) There are a few restaurants and small stores in town. Generally speaking, Gombodada felt to be on about the same socioeconomic level as Thulo Barkhu, minus the big trekking hotels; there were a lot of televisions and mobile phones around. Some children from Gombodada go to English-medium school in Kalikasthan, and after class five all of Narayansthan's students go to public school there.

Shree Narayansthan is set on a small plateau jutting out from the hill; it has two buildings with a total of six classrooms and an office, as well as a field for assembly and playtime. All the schools had some materials for children to play with during lunchtime, generally balls, jumpropes, and the like; Shree Narayansthan had the most of that kind of materials, including a small karom board for each class. The school teaches through class five and has five permanent teachers, generally older than the teachers in other schools. Three of the teachers are men from outside of Rasuwa (hilly areas, including one Newar from Bhaktapur); one is a local Tamang woman, and one a local Brahman-Chhetri man. Another person, a Tamang local referred to as *bhaai*<sup>13</sup> opened the school, made tea, and sometimes taught when one of the teachers wasn't around. The school is going to add a "1/2 class" later this year or next year, and will also be expanding to teach through the eighth grade in the near future: a new building with a few more classrooms is in the early stages of construction.

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<sup>13</sup>भाइ, younger brother. Nepalis frequently use kinship terminology as generic terms of address.

Shree Narayansthan is the only school I visited with any non-Tamang students to speak of: maybe twenty percent of the school is Brahman-Chhetri, and so do not really speak Tamang beyond the very basics. (One older Brahman-Chhetri student, when I asked him what the class-one students were doing, responded “I don’t know, the little kids all speak Tamang, so I don’t really understand what they do.”) This made for an interestingly reversed dynamic when certain teachers did speak Tamang, and was a reason cited by others that they spoke mostly Nepali in class. Narayansthan is a slightly larger school, with about a hundred and seventy students on the books.

## **Pranse**

Pranse is extremely near to Gombodada; there is no clear defining line between the villages, at least that I saw. (I stayed with the same family while visiting both schools.) Pranse is, however, qualitatively different from the town just downhill. The people seem to be a little poorer, on average. A few years ago, a large landslide – whose effects are still visible today – killed six villagers and wiped out some others’ fields, which was a great hardship for the town. The relative poverty, combined with being a little farther from Kalikasthan, means children seem to speak a little less Nepali, and it seemed like more of them did regular work in the fields. Fewer of them have school dress than in Gombodada. In general, the town had the feel of being noticeably poorer than their neighbors down the hill.

Shree Pranse, presumably named after the town in which it lies, only teaches from class one to three. It has four teachers: three extremely young local Tamang men (two of them were twenty-one or twenty-two; the headmaster was only a little older) and one middle-aged local Tamang woman. All the students are Tamang, ethnically and linguistically. The school is only one building, with three rooms; one of those rooms has serious structural problems and is blocked off. The smaller of the usable rooms doubles as the office and the class two classroom; the larger houses class three and, when they’re not outside, class one. Toilet and water facilities were nonfunctioning during my visit; at all the other schools, a water tap and

at least one (Nepali-style) toilet were always in working order.

As with all the schools, class one has a very long attendance list, but many of them do not actually show up to school; class two shrinks a lot after dropouts have been tallied. Even so, class two in Pranse is particularly small: six students, compared to about twelve who regularly show up for class one (there are 22 on the lists) and eleven in class three, all of whom regularly attend. (Interestingly, class two has only one girl, while class three has only three boys.) In total, there are about forty children on the lists at Pranse, about thirty of whom come on any given day.

# Findings and Analysis

A description of what I observed in each school follows, roughly in order of socioeconomic status. Some analysis is interleaved with the narrative, but the bulk of it lies in the General Thoughts section, starting on page 28.

## Shree Bhimsen - Thulo Barkhu

I first went to Thulo Barkhu, the relatively wealthy, high-Nepali town home to one of the pilot schools, Shree Bhimsen (described in more detail on page 13).

Although the school employs six teachers, they all came to school only on the very first day of my visit. After that, one of the local women's father died, and so in the grieving process and religious rituals following that, she did not come to school again over the next six days that I remained in Thulo Barkhu. Another began a weeklong training program in Dhunche, coincidentally about Tamang medium of instruction; due to time restraints, I was unfortunately unable to sit in. Although these are clearly both valid reasons not to teach, it left the school – which teaches classes one through six – with only four teachers. The lack of teachers also obviated the official schedule, which was shuffled around greatly depending on which teachers were available when.

This necessarily meant a lot of downtime for the children, especially those in classes one and two. Teachers would move between classes, teaching for a little bit and then leaving them with something to do; once the teacher left the room, however, class one in particular inevitably began playing. During this downtime, students mostly spoke Tamang to one another, though

there were also significant amounts of Nepali – especially when interacting with the foreigner who didn't speak Tamang, but also when talking about something school-related and to a lesser extent in general speech.

Teachers' use of Tamang, on the other hand, varied widely from teacher to teacher.

For the purposes of this report, I will refer to the Bhimsen teachers present for my observations as the math teacher (who is from the Terai), the English teacher (who is also the headmaster, from the hills), the Nepali teacher (a local woman), and the Tamang teacher (a local woman). These are the main subjects that each one taught to classes one and two; occasionally this might become something of a misnomer, as when I talk about the Nepali teacher teaching social studies, but it is more convenient.

The math teacher and the English teacher (who, recall, were not fluent in Tamang) used a fair bit of Tamang in general classroom management and chatting-style communications, but most of their actual imparting-content speech was in Nepali. The two teachers fluent in Tamang actually spoke a little less Tamang in general, though they were more likely to deal with a more major incident in Tamang – when a child was upset about something, for example. Pre-class “how are you” chatting was sometimes in Tamang, especially with the Tamang-fluent teachers. In instruction, however, all teachers primarily used Nepali, with some Tamang “code-switching” – integrating a Tamang word or phrase into a Nepali sentence.

Tamang class itself, of course, was almost entirely in Tamang. Interestingly, the class was taught almost like one would teach a foreign language: the lessons I saw were all relatively basic vocabulary lessons, with words like “house,” “flower,” and “field.” The students seemed to all already know the words, so I wonder whether another kind of lesson might be more useful. In any case, after “learning” a Tamang word, the teacher would sometimes verify that students had understood by asking something along the lines of “What does *ghim* mean?” “House!” Instructional methods were somewhere higher on the interactivity (and effectiveness) spectrum than point-and-say, described below, but the very basic level of the content probably limits how effective such a class can be.

Explicit textbook usage in Bhimsen was far more restricted than elsewhere; the only times I really saw textbooks being used in classes one and two were to get the words to a song. (In fact, this English slogan was posted in the office: “No plan, no class / No teaching without materials / Textbook Free Teaching.”) Lesson plans, however, seemed to come right out of the book, especially in the more point-and-say oriented classes. Although this is a Tamang-language pilot school, all textbooks are the same Nepali ones as everywhere else; according to Department of Education Inclusive Education Section (2008), no regular-course textbooks have been translated into Tamang yet.<sup>14</sup> Local teachers were unaware that textbooks had been translated into other languages, and were under the impression that if they wanted such books, they would have to create them themselves. This limits the ability of the school to fulfill its all-Tamang instructional goal, since the teachers are teaching lessons out of textbooks in Nepali. (Although translating “Sanjib breathes” to Tamang is probably not very hard for a fluent Tamang speaker, it *is* probably hard for a dedicated textbook-teacher to do so.)

## The Point-and-Say Technique

The following is an example demonstrative of a very common teaching style across the schools I observed. It appears to be explicitly encouraged by textbooks, who refer to it as “point and say.” In general, it goes something like this:

The Nepali teacher begins the lesson by writing the Nepali vowels, in alphabetical order, on the whiteboard:

अ आ इ ई उ ऊ ऋ  
ए ऐ ओ औ अं अः

Each time this lesson takes place, she writes them in exactly that way, with the lines split up exactly like that.

Then she begins pointing to the letters with a cue and reading them in pairs: अ आ, इ ई, उ ऊ. The students repeat her after each pair. After going through this way a few times, she

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<sup>14</sup>This is an interesting decision, as grade one textbooks *have* been translated into Bhorpuri, Awahi, Limbu, and Gurung, languages in which no pilot schools exist, as well as Maithali, Tharu, and Magar, which do have pilot schools.

calls up a student, gives him or her the pointer, and tells them to do the same. (Actually, by the time I got there, she no longer needed to give any such instructions, just hand the kid the pointer; they knew how it worked.)

The student then attempted to repeat what the teacher had just done. Almost always, the student made a lot of mistakes that made it very clear he didn't actually grasp what had happened. The most common mistake was to misalign what he said and what he pointed at; for example, saying अ आ but pointing at only अ, then saying इ ई while pointing at आ. Some students would point at the right ones, but then skip or repeat a letter and continue on, saying ओ औ while pointing at ऐ ओ. It was clear that they had learned the sequence, but not the correspondence to the symbols, which was the whole point. The teacher would almost always correct them, but not always immediately; after each pupil had gone through the vowels a few times, she called up another. After several students had done this, she told them all to write down the vowels in their copies.<sup>15</sup> She then wrote out examples in each student's notebook for them to copy from, and left the room. Within moments of her leaving, the copies were left half-done on desks while students played a rock-tossing game and jumped around.

The next day, when it was time for Nepali class again, she came in and did almost the same thing. After a brief point-and-say session of just the vowels, she then wrote complete words on the board, under the vowels:<sup>16</sup>

अनार आमा इनार ईस्वर उख ऊन ऋषि  
एकतारे ऐना ओदान औचार अङ्गुर

Then she went through the words with their initial letters, saying अनार-अ, आमा-आ, with the same rhythm throughout. The same pass-off to students took place, and exactly the same problems came up. Students learned the sequence, but not to associate words with their

<sup>15</sup>Nepalis refer to notebooks as a "copy" (कापी), adopting the English word. This is perhaps indicative of what they are generally used for.

<sup>16</sup>These words are all simple nouns, though not necessarily ones the children are familiar with. They certainly know आमा, mother, but अनार, pomegranate, do not grow in the area. There is no word for अः, as it cannot begin words; also, in writing, the teacher used a more complicated (though equivalent) form of अँ in writing out अङ्गुर, "grape." (Note that there should be no gap in that word; the limitations of the author's knowledge in typesetting Devanagari required that it be present to prevent it from being rendered as अङ्गुर, the still-more-complicated but also equivalent way of writing the word, which is not what the teacher wrote.)

written representation. Then, after a while, they copied down all the words, and the next day they did exactly the same thing, the only difference being that they went straight to the words.

It should be pointed out that students had not yet learned any consonants, so any chance of actually reading the words seemed slim. I suppose this aspect of the instruction could be, on paper, viewed as an enactment of the “spiral curriculum” espoused by progressive educational theorist Jerome Bruner (1966), but the sheer repetition involved and the utter lack of progress in the four days that I saw this same lesson take place cast some serious doubts on that notion. Perhaps the curriculum developers had that in mind, but by the time it reaches these children, that is not at all what is going on.

I also observed this teacher using this method in a class two social studies lesson. In this case, the content of the lesson was a handful of sentences along the lines of “Sanjib grows,” “Sanjib breathes,” “Sanjib can move.” She taught this in exactly the same way: she read them a few times, then called up students to read them. The main difference was that this time, she called them up in roll order, from first to last.<sup>17</sup> This meant that the first student called up was roll number one; she had done the best on the test the year before, so she was probably the best at memorizing things. She could say the sentences with only a little prompting. Then came student number two, who had just heard the sentences a few more times and so could say them himself. And so on through the ranks; by the time it reached the lowest students, who were less able to read, it was absolutely clear from the mistakes that they made that they were not actually reading the sentences, just reciting them from memory, as they had just heard them gone through twenty times.

The English teacher also used an almost identical strategy in teaching children the English alphabet. When I was there, two months into the school year, they all knew the alphabet song,<sup>18</sup> but if you asked them to say or write a given letter, they had to sing the song and

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<sup>17</sup>Nepali schools in many ways revolve around the roll number, which is assigned to each student according to their test results from the year before. From class two onwards, in general teachers only refer to students by number, and students often refer to one another by number as well: in Gombodada, one student, pointing out that a classmate had arrived, said “Sir! Eighteen just came!”

<sup>18</sup>Which is not the alphabet song we use in the US – there’s no melody to it, it’s just a recitation of all the

point along to a copy of the alphabet to find which one it was.

Point-and-say was in wide use across the schools, with horrible results throughout. When I asked teachers why they did it, though, they said either “that’s how we teach”: that was how they had learned, that was what they had taken out of teacher training and instructional guides, and that was just how it was done.

## The Math Teacher’s Style

The “math teacher,” who is not Tamang but rather from the Terai, of South Indian descent, taught in a very different way. While I was there, he worked to teach his students the very basics of addition, starting with  $1 + 1 = 2$  and moving from there. In doing so, he consistently moved from concrete examples to the abstraction, going back to the concrete when he saw that students needed it. One of the examples he used in that first  $1+1$  lesson was to pull two students up to the front of the class and ask, “How many girls are standing here?” The class would reply in unison, “One!” Then he would ask “How many girls are standing over *here*?” The class replied, “One!” Then he continued, “One plus one,” pulling the two students to stand next to one another, “is how many?” “Two!”

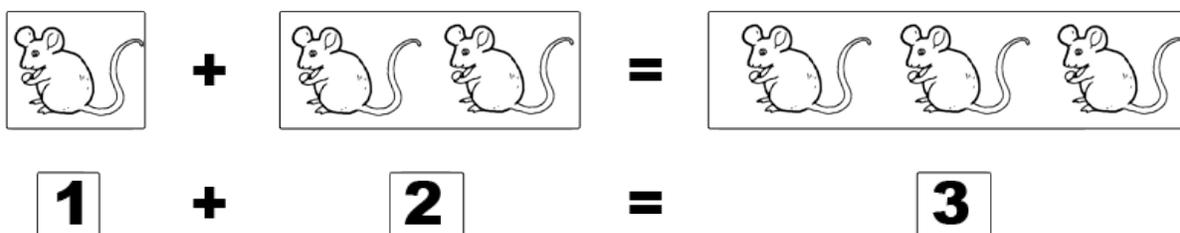


Figure 1: What the “math teacher” drew on the board as part of a basic addition lesson.

He also did similar things with drawing pictures on the board, as shown in Figure 1. There, he drew the mice and asked, “How many mice are there?” for both the one-mouse and two-mouse sections. After asking how many, he wrote the numeral below and verified with the class that it was the correct number. Then he asked them how many mice were one the right, letters to a fixed rhythm. More of an alphabet chant, perhaps.

and if there were the same number on each side. He gradually shifted to the more abstract method of dealing directly with the numerals, being careful to go back to concrete examples when the students had difficulty with the conceptual jump.

There was repetition here, to be sure, but it was far more varied than in the point-and-say method. Rather than doing exactly the same thing over and over again, the teacher moved between a variety of different concrete examples, and between drawing things on the board and manipulating physical objects. Doing so allowed students to see a variety of different cases in which simple addition holds, while simultaneously driving in the  $1 + 2 = 3$  fact.

### Language Use

Singh (2005) gives an example where, when a teacher asked how many leaves there were, a student replied using the Santhal word, *patta*. The teacher then immediately corrected him, “That’s a *patta* in your language, but we say *pat* in Nepali. You should say *pat*,” interrupting mathematics class to correct their word use (p. 17).

A very similar situation came up in the just-cited example of drawing mice to teach addition. While the teacher was drawing the first mouse, students began shouting the Tamang name. He didn’t say anything to that, just finished drawing the mice, and then asked, “How many are there?”, avoiding the use of a noun. Once it had been established that there were two, he asked, “How many *musaa* are there?” The students all replied, “Two *musaa*!” In this way, he did teach children the word *musaa*, but he did it without outwardly correcting or rebuking them, and without taking any focus away from class. When the teacher in Singh (2005)’s example took time out from class to say that the Santhal language was wrong and gave them the way that “we” say it in Nepali, he was explicitly setting a difference between the Santhal minority and the rest of the class (and indeed the rest of the country), and saying that the Santhali way was wrong. This is precisely the kind of environment that the एक भाषा system set up, a divisive “we’re right and you’re wrong” situation that alienated minorities. The math teacher in Thulo Barkhu, whether consciously or not, managed to avoid all of that

while still accomplishing exactly the same positive effects: teaching the children the word *musaa*.

In the “adding schoolchildren” example as well a minor language issue came up. In Nepali, when counting a noun, one must use a word between the number and the noun being counted: for example, *tin waaTa musaa* तीन वाट मुसा is *three <count-word> mice*. For people, one should use the counting word *jaana* जान. This is a distinction not made in Tamang, and so when the children were saying “one girl,” “two girls,” they used *waaTa* rather than *jaana*. The teacher, rather than give them a lesson on when to use *waaTa* and when *jaana*, simply repeats the question using *jaana* until they start saying *jaana*. Explicit grammar lessons rarely work for young children, whether in the first language or second, at least according to Cazden (1973, pp. 136–38); rather, grammatical rules are absorbed through some process that is still far from understood. Giving children more data points from which to draw an understanding of the rules for when to use *jaana* and when to use *waaTa* is all that will work, and that is exactly what the teacher does here.

## Shree Narayansthan - Gombodada

Shree Narayansthan, in Gombodada, is a non-pilot school<sup>19</sup> in a relatively high-Nepali area; the location is described in more detail on page 14.

As mentioned earlier, this school (which teaches classes one through five) has five teachers, plus the *bhaai* who does miscellaneous chores and teaches when a teacher is gone. I was able to visit Shree Narayansthan for only two days; the first day I was there, the headmaster had gone to Kathmandu for some business matter or other, and the second day I was there, one of the teachers decided not to come. None of the other teachers knew why. This meant that both days I was there, the *bhaai* taught.

When I first told the teachers what I was there to do, there was something of a misunder-

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<sup>19</sup>Non-pilot in the medium-of-instruction program; in the past, it was a pilot school for the local curriculum program, and was in fact analyzed by Singh (2005)

standing; I said I wanted to watch class as in observe, and they thought I meant I wanted to watch class as in watch after a class and teach them something. They were all too willing to let me do so, with no credentials beyond my being Western and a very minimal introduction from the teacher at Shree Pranse with whom I was staying at the time; they were in fact very eager to have me go and take control of the classroom that their headmaster would have been teaching at the time, no questions asked.

Later in the day, some class seven kids who had formerly gone to Narayansthan came back up from their school down the hill; they had gotten out a little early. So, after lunch the teachers who were supposed to be in charge of classes one through three just kind of let those kids take over. They drilled the students on alphabets and the list of numbers from 1 to 100, in both Nepali numerals and Western ones, exclusively using the previously described point-and-say method.

Some of the real teachers' methods were not all that different. Classes one and two learned – were taught, at least – the Nepali consonants, the English alphabet, and numerals from one to a hundred (both the Nepali १ २ ३ ४ and the Western 1 2 3 4) by having the topic at hand written on the board, repeating after the teacher and other students for a while, and then writing the whole thing into their copies. During the lengthy writing step of that process, teachers would normally wander in and out of the room.

In class 2 math lesson in particular, a teacher carefully set up an 8 by 5 grid on the board, filled in a few random numbers out of it, and told the students to fill in the rest of the numbers, from १ to ४०. He also told them that if they couldn't make the grid properly, he would show them how; this ended up with him drawing out the grid for almost everyone in the class. (He kept looking at the board and re-counting the number of lines in his grid, indicating that this was not supposed to be an introductory multiplication lesson or anything, or at least *he* didn't intend it to be – maybe the textbook did.) Then he left the room for a while, leaving the kids to fill in their grids...except that as soon as he left the room, most of them started chatting and playing with one another. After all, they had already spent all period writing out the

numbers from one to a hundred just the day before, and probably many times before that.

When he returned and found that most of the students hadn't completed the task, he angrily went down the line, hitting students or twisting their ears. One girl, who had been sitting right next to her friend on the bench and copying off of her, was pulled by her hair to sit farther away. Then he told them to write out all the numbers, from one to a hundred, and left the room again. The girl whose hair he had pulled promptly slid over to copy off her friend, who was writing the numbers squished up together, so it looked something like Figure 2, at right. She wrote the numbers vertically down the page, but made no distinction between numbers that were already written and the ones she was writing now. Her friend then copied her exactly. I doubt whether they had any understanding of the concept of what a number is at all, beyond something that you copy exactly into books when the teacher tells you to. Clearly, the all point-and-say strategy was not working for them.

11121
21222
31323
41424
51525
61626
717
818
919
1020

Figure 2: Numbers from 1 to 26, as one student wrote them.

Probably as a consequence of the amount of ambient violence, students were by far the most casually violent here. During downtime, play fighting (which sometimes turned into real fighting, although nothing too serious) broke out far more regularly than in other schools.

This is not to say, however, that all teaching in Gombodada was this bad. Another teacher talked to me about how teachers should treat their students well,<sup>20</sup> and only then will they learn. That teacher, in fact, *did* treat the students much better, and they liked him for it and were much more willing to participate in class.

This respect that children had for him allowed him to bring a little more actual thought into his lessons, as well. Immediately before the math lesson just described, I observed him teach a science lesson to grade two, which was about the ways that different kinds of animals

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<sup>20</sup>The original statement was मय गर्नु पर्छ, which would be translated very literally as “should do love.”

move. The teacher made a big table on the board, wrote down an animal name – the first one was गाई, cow – and asked students how cows move. Walking, they said, and he asked for more details: how many legs do they use? Do they go fast or slow? Can someone come up and show me how a cow walks? Gradually, they got to an answer he liked (which roughly translates as “with four legs, slowly, one after the other”). He wrote it in the table and then moved on to the next animal, fish. He asked students about the concept of things that can move by themselves and things that cannot. Then, because they were a teacher short that day, he apologized but said he had to go teach class three, so he told them to copy down the chart. Although perhaps not the most awe-inspiring lesson, it attempted to get students interactively thinking and categorizing rather than simply memorizing. The children, because they liked this teacher, were willing to hold a conversation with him; and then, because they respected him, they actually did copy down the chart after he left. Obviously, it would have been better if he hadn’t had to go, but the school was short on teachers that day.

Another teacher attempted to make a game out of learning some Nepali vocabulary words. It sort of worked, but was greatly hindered by the students’ utter inability to read, probably as a consequence of their not really recognizing individual letters without going through the alphabet song.

These teachers, like most of the others in Shree Narayansthan, hardly spoke a word of Tamang during class. Typically, periods would go by with perhaps five words of Tamang spoken by the teacher, all of which would be quite simple: “do you have your copies?” Students, on the other hand, spoke a lot of Tamang to one another, though never (that I saw) to the teacher. In classes one through three, after the teacher gave instructions to do something, small groups of students would chat in Tamang for a moment, presumably discussing exactly what they were supposed to do. After the science lesson, while students were copying down the chart, they chatted among themselves in Tamang.

One exception to this is the *bhaai* who sometimes taught. While teaching, he spoke Tamang probably more than half the time – because the kids are better at Tamang than

Nepali, he said. His instruction, however, was entirely point-and-say based. Generally, in my observations, he was attempting to impart either an alphabet or, one time, a handful of English words: mango, fish, dog, and so on. While teaching alphabets, there was zero variation from the classic point-and-say method described earlier. In teaching the words, he did vary the order in which he said words, and also inquired as to words' meanings, but that lesson was still not very effective. He gave no context at all, just wrote words on the board, had kids repeat words and their meanings (like “mango – आँप”), and then quizzed them on their meanings. Some kind of visual aid would probably have been helpful there, even just a quick sketch on the blackboard.

Shree Narayansthan was actually one of the pilot schools for the local curriculum project, not so many years ago. On the schedule, all grades are supposed to have a potato-farming class in the afternoon. This did not happen, at least in grades one through three, on either of the days I observed.

## **Shree Pranse - Pranse**

Pranse is the poorer, low-Nepali area just up the hill from Gombodada; its school, Shree Pranse, teaches through class three only. A more detailed description is on page 15.

The children at Pranse were by far the shiest of any of the schools I visited, perhaps because of the small size of the school and its being, in some ways, the most isolated. (Pranse was the only school that had not been a pilot school for something or other, so unlike the other schools, there is not a constant flow of researchers in and out.)

Class one children here do not seem to speak a lot of Nepali, though I didn't see any clear instances where a child could not understand what was being said in Nepali. By class two, though, their Nepali seemed as good as it was anywhere else I visited.

As mentioned previously, Pranse has four teachers; I visited for three days. For the first two days, one teacher was at some kind of training related to teaching Tibetan script; and on day one, the headmaster left after the first hour to go “up the hill” – neither of the other

teachers knew what he was doing. The next day, the woman just did not show up. Then on the third day, although the teacher who had been at training had returned, neither the headmaster nor the woman came to school, again for unknown reasons. One teacher (the teacher I was staying with at the time) did come every day, but he thought nothing of coming to school late on the first day because he was running late on the morning meal schedule (my fault), and then leaving school for an hour on the last day to see me off to the bus. So, where Narayansthan's teachers give away their classes to others easily, Pranse's teachers do not come to school easily.

Also mentioned earlier is the fact that Pranse at the time had only two usable classrooms, for three grades. Sometimes class one was taught outside, in which case there were of course some distractions related to throwing rocks down the hill, and there was no blackboard, but class was generally able to go on. When not outside, that class was taught in the same room as class three, with class three taking up the left half of the room and class one the right. Then, because there are so many more class three children than class one, the teacher is not really able to teach anything; class three just drowns it out, so often the teacher doesn't even try. Class one is not taught a whole lot at Pranse, so I spent the bulk of my time with class two. (I did see the only example of a real, for-fun game being played as part of classtime there; after a math lesson on numbers, class one played "I have a dog"/म संग कुकुर छ, a game in the style of duck-duck-goose.)

There are only six students (five boys and a girl) in Pranse's class two. Their instruction is, as everywhere, heavily based on point-and-say, though there were a few factors that made it significantly better than elsewhere.

For example, these students had already learned the basic Nepali alphabet, but were learning the various vowel signs while I was there. The way the teacher did this was to do one vowel sign a day and get lots of practice with it; to do so, he ran a standard point-and-say session with one major difference. Instead of doing eight words and having the students repeat them endlessly, he wrote *thirty-eight* words on the board: far too many to just memorize,

especially since there were only six students to go through. Whether this is better than just writing new words every time for the students to say, I don't know, but I do know that it definitely got the students reading much more than they would have in point-and-say lessons at other schools. He also gave a decent introductory lesson on multiplication to this class; it was straight out of the textbook, but rather than emphasizing doing exactly what the textbook said, he tried to bring the focus to the concepts themselves.

These students had not, however, learned the English alphabet by the time I got there. The headmaster, in teaching them said alphabet, set up a basic point-and-say going sequentially through the alphabet. Then, while they were doing that, he started writing the alphabet out, but in an arbitrary order: k b l m p . . . . When he asked them to read this, they started in the usual order, a b c. He stopped them and asked, "Is this a?" Some students said yes, some no. After a moment, the consensus emerged that it was not, so he asked what letter it was. They immediately began pointing at the in-order alphabet on the board, going through the song to figure out which one k was. He then continued through the next couple letters in this way, asking individual students about a letter, but quickly grew frustrated with their inability to produce the right letters. After a few minutes, he gave up, telling them to write out the alphabet in their copies, and then he left the room.

The teacher here attempted to move outside of the point-and-say paradigm just a little bit, and he found that his students were completely unable to do so. Point-and-say prepares students for nothing except more point-and-say.

With this kind of preparation, it was no surprise when I watched the class three students try to read an English passage. (It was a short story about a girl's daily routine, on page three of the textbook – two months into the school year.) The lesson plan I saw allocated three days to reading it and then making their own similar stories; the students had been attempting to just read it for the last week, and according to the teacher, they weren't really getting any better. They were able to repeat after him just fine, but when told to read it themselves – in chorus or individually – there were some problems. Although by that time they clearly more

or less knew how it went, they were also just as clearly not actually reading the story, and probably had no idea what most of it meant. When confronted with a word like “homework” in the unison reading, they would all pause, and then one kid would say “sister”: a word that is indeed in the story, but both makes no sense in context and looks nothing like the word written on the board. After the first kid said “sister,” though, the others would all repeat “sister” as well. In these situations, the teacher would either just keep saying “no, it’s not *sister*; no, it’s not *dog*,” or provide the right word. I never saw any prompting to sound out the word, possibly because the students still had difficulty with saying arbitrary letters from the alphabet.

In an American school, a few students certainly make it to third or fourth grade before they learn to read, and many of them go on to do just fine. In Nepali schools, however, everything is oriented around the all-important year-end test, which is of course written. Though this study was far too limited in scope to provide any evidence at all for this theory, it would seem reasonable that once a student does very poorly on a year-end test because he cannot read, and then has it drilled into his head every single day that he is at the bottom of his class, it would be very hard for him to re-establish the confidence that he can do better, and so he stops trying as hard.

Language use in Pranse was mostly Nepali. Certain teachers, especially the one described in teaching vowel signs, were accepting of when students did speak Tamang, and would reply in Tamang to minor crises, when students rushed over jabbering about something in Tamang. Sometimes they would initiate some chit-chat in Tamang. But during classroom time, the only situation in which I observed the teachers initiating any Tamang use was when they were telling students to do something and the student didn’t reply to the first instruction in Nepali.

One of the teachers, who like all of the other teachers at Shree Pranse spoke fluent Tamang, made it extremely unwelcome in the classroom. While teaching social studies to class two one day, a student said *jinji*, indicating in Tamang that he was done with what he had been doing. She snapped at him, asking angrily in Nepali, “What does *jinji* mean? Do you mean *siddhiyo*

[the Nepali equivalent]? Is that what you were saying?” The student meekly nodded and looked away.

As discussed in the section entitled Language Use, back on page 20, this kind of discourse sets up an environment extremely unfriendly to the Tamang students and their language, even when the teacher is herself Tamang. When students get yelled at because they spoke the language that they are most comfortable in and identify most with, they will inevitably feel alienated from the school and from the government itself that created that school.

Gersten (1996), a study of Spanish-English bilingual educators in grades four through six, found that “expert teachers always accepted [a] Spanish response but encouraged students to try it in English. They did this with the same gentleness, the same curiosity that they displayed when asking students to explain how they reached that conclusion” (p. 237). Although they are dealing with higher grades, in a very different school system, where students are expected to give some kind of creative and/or analytical thought rather than simply memorize things, that attitude is about as far from this teacher’s reaction as can be had.

## **Shree Saraswati - Thade**

Thade is home to the other Tamang-medium pilot school, Shree Saraswati. In this school, as mentioned in my description of the town of Thade on page 13, children entering classes one and two have a very limited facility with the Nepali language; as far as I could tell, some of the children in the class seemed to understand almost no Nepali at all, making this (one would think) the ideal place to pilot a mother-tongue-medium instruction program.

Unfortunately, school in Thade – particularly classes one and two – faces a lot of difficulties that other schools examined in this study do not really have to deal with, making it hard to tell how effective the pilot program is really being.

As mentioned earlier, most of Shree Saraswati’s teachers do not live in Thade, they commute from Dhunche – which, despite being only eight kilometers (five miles), takes at least half an hour on the bus. Accordingly, the teachers all arrive in Thade right around ten AM,

when school is scheduled to start. Then they eat their morning meal together at the local restaurant, and around 10:20, 10:30, head up the hill to start the school day. Generally speaking, assembly is not over until 10:45 or almost 11, when it is scheduled to be done by 10:15.

Despite this very delayed start, classes one and two tend to arrive in clumps a little bit later even than that; they're generally coming from their family's गोठ, where their parents have been tending to the livestock, and so after eating it might take them more than an hour to get to school. (In the rainy season, the trip is so bad that many don't come at all.)

Once a reasonable amount of children have filtered in to the shared classroom, instruction starts. Now, like at all these schools, Shree Saraswati has a fixed daily schedule: 10:15 to 11 is supposed to be Nepali with one teacher, 11 to 11:55 math with another, and so on. At most schools I visited, the schedule is not closely followed, but at Thade there is barely any relation at all between what's written on that chart and what actually happens in the classroom. I was only able to observe there for two days, but on the first day, two teachers came in over the course of the day; on the second, only one ever came.

At first, I was impressed that Shree Saraswati did not use the point-and-say method at all in their instruction. The first lesson I saw was an attempt to teach the Nepali consonants; the teacher passed out to each student a little plastic cutout in the shape of a letter, then went around asking students if they knew what their letter was. Only one or two children, from class two, did; if they didn't, she told them what it was, and said it a few times until the student was pronouncing it correctly. She then went around the room, which was gradually growing from maybe seven students to about twenty, asking them their letter and reminding them if they had forgotten. With twenty students and only one teacher, this meant that at any given time about nineteen students were chatting or playing amongst themselves. It took a lot of repetition before most of the students learned their one letter. Then she collected all the letters and had them pick out which one was theirs; finally, she had the class two students copy the letters into their notebooks, while the class one students didn't really do anything.

This was an intriguing lesson to me: it involved learning one letter at a time, which avoids the learning-the-sequence problem of the point-and-say alphabet method, and also involved a tangible *thing* that students could hold. On the other hand, it involved a lot of downtime, and at the rate of one letter a day, it would take thirty-six days to learn the thirty-six Nepali consonants, assuming that they remembered them all – which seemed a tall order when students couldn’t remember their letter even while they held it in their hands.

I asked the teacher why she was teaching the lesson this way. She told me that she had these blocks, which some NGO had given the school, but the classroom didn’t have a blackboard. I looked around, shocked, but realized it was true.

Classes one and two are in an extremely large room; the kids squeeze up in one and a half rows of benches against the back wall, leaving maybe eighty percent of the room open. The walls are decorated with beautiful paintings, done by locals, of the village, the nearby Langtang peak, and of various religious ceremonies; the only school-related materials are on the back wall, behind the students. These consist of a correspondence chart between Devanagari and the Tibetan alphabet, and a lengthy chunk of text in Tibetan script.<sup>21</sup> There was no blackboard. If there had been, the teacher said, she would have been very happy to use the point-and-say method; then, she thought, the students might be able to learn a little better. (She spoke mostly Tamang to the children, with the exception of some minor classroom interactions: “sit here,” “don’t hit him.”)

On my first day observing, after this Nepali lesson another teacher came in (after a while of downtime with no teachers in the room) and led the class in a few Nepali songs, for social studies class. He talked about the songs a bit, in both Nepali and in Tamang; for example, one of the songs dealt with what “you” had done over the week, and so he went through each day and said things like “On Saturday, you bathed after eating the tasty food that your

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<sup>21</sup>I later asked that teacher and another what it said; they had no idea, not being able to read the script, or to understand the language even if they could have deciphered the script. One teacher, out of five at the school, had taken a one-week course on the script and could sort of read it, but she too did not really know the Tibetan language itself. The only people in the area who do are *lamas*; in fact, the teachers called Tibetan “*lama* language.” Despite that, Shree Saraswati is supposed to be teaching Tibetan, as their local-curriculum subject. The school doesn’t even try to do that anymore.

mom made, right?” After about twenty or thirty minutes of that, and a little dancing to another song, he left. He spoke perhaps half Nepali, half Tamang in talking to the children, not counting the Nepali songs.

Lunch break is at 1:15. In all of the schools I visited, very few students actually eat anything at that time; the teachers sometimes have tea. At Thade, however, most of the first- and second-grade students went back to get food from home or the **गोठ**, and then most of them never came back. There was no more instruction for classes one and two after lunch.

I was told that there used to be an NGO running a program that would give these children, in class one and two, food for lunch. That was a five-year program, however, and after it expired it just stopped. While the program was running, overall attendance among young children was a little better, and they were able to teach after lunch. While I was there, though, class for grades one and two goes from just before 11:00 until 1:15, and that’s it for the day. Much of that time, as well, is just downtime. On the second day I was there, one teacher was in and out for that whole period, and she occasionally gave some of the children something to copy out in their notebooks: a few English letters or a few short Nepali words. Beside that, though, there was nothing that might be called instruction, just playing and running around.

Something else I observed here and a little bit in Pranse, but not in the other two schools, was that there were a few *very* young children in the class: two and three years old. These were the younger siblings of kids in class one and two; parents sent them to school with their older brother or sister, basically as a day care, because they needed to work in the fields all day. These young children, of course, disturbed their sibling and the rest of the class whenever they were attempting to do any work.

Since class one and two were done after lunch, I then sat in on class three. Those children could speak Nepali relatively well, but many of them were clearly unconfident in their ability to do so. (The pilot program has been running long enough that these children have been in it their whole school careers.) Class appeared to be in mixed Tamang-Nepali, though most of

the time that I was there was just downtime. (The classrooms for all the rooms except class one and two's do have blackboards.)

Teachers here said that the school's biggest problems were more or less what one might expect from reading this account: poverty, basically. They need a blackboard, textbooks (in either language), at least one more teacher, copies and pens for the children, and food for class one and two, so that they stay through the day. Some toys would also be very welcome.

Being in the medium-of-instruction program hadn't really changed all that much at the school, they said. Sure, they spoke a little more Tamang than they used to, but all the books were still in Nepali. It is important to speak Tamang for these kids, they said, but the school was already doing that before the program began.

## General Thoughts

There were a few troubling aspects common to all the schools I visited, mostly related to teachers and their behavior:

- The use of traditional rote-learning teaching methods, particularly point-and-say.
- The amount of downtime that students sit through every day, in all schools.
- Issues related to the use of Tamang and Nepali languages, both in terms of how comfortable children are in the school environment and the underlying power structures.

## Teaching Methods

The point-and-say method of instruction is, in short, terrible. Students do not really learn the content, it is mind-numbingly boring, and it establishes in students the view that school and learning in general is only about absorbing and regurgitating facts, especially with the high-stakes memorization-based exams every year. Very few Nepalis, generally speaking, read for pleasure; given the way they learn to read, can you blame them?

Rato Bangala Foundation (2008) realizes this. A teacher-training foundation created by

the elite Rato Bangala School, the Foundation aims to train teachers to work towards “child-friendly” schools that “cater to the developmental needs of each student.” The program’s director, Bipul Gaulam, told me that the way to solve this problem, to “make lessons interesting and effective” for students, involves “using mother tongue as the medium of instruction,” but more importantly, it relies on teachers “designing their own lessons” based on the national curriculum but tailored for the local context. In science classes, for example: certain cultures in Nepal have a different system of categorizing what counts as “alive” and what does not, and discussing in class why in the scientific view a tree is alive but in their local tongue and culture it is not would be fruitful for the students.

Textbooks, then, don’t need to be translated, he said. Why do teachers need textbooks? They need a detailed but flexible curriculum that they can work from themselves. It might be more work, he conceded, but given the proper training in the process, teachers will be able to do it, and it will be the right thing to do. This is, he thinks, the most important issue in the Nepali education system, by a long shot.

None of the teachers that I observed had gone through that kind of training, and none of them really did that much customization of the lesson plan. Some were more adept at using the lesson plan on a higher level, and some were not. Given the proper training, though, most of them might be able to think more about the goals of what the lesson is actually trying to accomplish, and think about how best to achieve those goals. Or, at the very least, such training would (somewhat ironically) drill it into them that rote memorization techniques are bad and they should use something more interactive and effective.

## **Downtime**

All of the schools had major issues with downtime in the classroom, especially time in which there just was no teacher present. This is often caused by a shortage of teachers, where the school has exactly the right amount but then, for whatever reason, one or two don’t show up. This is an extremely common situation: of all the days I observed, only on the very first one

at Thulo Barkhu did all the teachers who were supposed to be there come.

This also causes a big problem in that, when choosing the subjects that do get taught if there's a shortage, teachers almost always opt for the "basics": Nepali, math, English. Thulo Barkhu added Tamang to that list. Other subjects tend to get pushed by the wayside; I did see a fair number of social studies classes, almost all of which consisted exclusively of singing songs, but saw only one or two science classes and no health or potato farming (the local curriculum in Thulo Barkhu).

Even when teachers show up, however, there is still a lot of downtime. A lot of that has to do with the teaching methods issue; the last stage of point-and-say, "copy this down," tends to take a long time, and teachers generally don't stick around for that. Other times, they simply take breaks in between going to classes or end class early to have a moment to themselves.

Having more teachers, so that each teacher doesn't have to be teaching at every moment of the day and so that there are more "backups" when some inevitably don't show up, would solve both of these problems. Conceding that as probably unrealistic, however, perhaps reworking the schedules to allow for more frequent, shorter breaks throughout the day would help with the latter problem, at least.

## **Language Issues**

In general, in the pilot schools, issues of language were handled relatively well. Use of Tamang was always accepted, if not necessarily encouraged as much as they could be. This, as discussed earlier (p. 20), at least does not actively set up a negative environment in terms of Tamang language use, even if it also does not create as positive an environment as it could – which would, in an abstract sense, be very positive for issues of identity and empowerment. In terms of educational success, although I do believe that it would be helpful, definitively answering such a question is beyond the scope of this study.

In the non-pilot schools I examined, on the other hand, there were a few instances of very negative occurrences – the teacher in Pranse snapping being the best example of that. Those

kind of events recall the **एक भाषा** paradigm of the *panchayat* regime, which has been definitively decided to be a bad thing world-wide. Educationally, it was hard to find specific instances where speaking in Nepali was actively bad for the students, because of the nature of how such issues affect children. Overall, the children in Thulo Barkhu were perhaps a little more eager to participate than elsewhere, but that could just have easily have been due to socioeconomic factors as anything else. The small scope and limited time-window of this project make it exceedingly hard to know. Perhaps a study examining one school and how it changes after becoming a mother-tongue medium-of-instruction school would be more able to approach this issue.

# Conclusions

In theory, it is apparent that mother-tongue medium-of-instruction for at least early primary school is the correct approach. Parents' concerns about "falling behind" in Nepali and English do have some merit — an exclusive focus on mother-tongue would be not only practically impossible at higher levels of education (how could Nepal possibly support a full college curriculum in each of a hundred different languages, or even secondary schools?), it would be disadvantageous for all parties if Nepali were to stop being the highly useful link language that it is today. In the right balance, however, mother tongue education can be crucial for educational success (as demonstrated in other countries), for the legitimization of all of Nepal's various ethnic and linguistic identities, and for the forging of a strong, inclusive nation-state.

In terms of whether this particular pilot program has been successful: this study is nowhere near broad enough to answer that question. A lengthier, more in-depth ethnographic approach, preferably over the course of a school's entrance to the program, by a researcher who knows Tamang would be needed for a really valid qualitative answer. This study does not even attempt to begin to look at the program's success from the quantitative, sociological perspective, which is also important.

Very tentatively, however, it seems that there are at least two very different categories of school in Tamang communities in Rasuwa. Unfortunately, as it so often is, the line is drawn essentially between (relatively) rich and poor communities. The amount of Nepali that children speak is, at least from my observations, very strongly correlated to socioeconomic status, and so the two important factors come essentially hand-in-hand.

In richer, high-Nepali schools, I would think that the program is moderately helpful; how-

ever, it is extremely hard to tell from this kind of study. There are enough differences between Thulo Barkhu and Gombodada that a direct comparison is only partially applicable. More importantly, there are so few teachers involved that any differences seen – of which there were definitely a few in Shree Bhimsen’s favor – could just as well have been random, depending on the teacher.

In poorer, low-Nepali schools, this program seems more necessary, for obvious reasons. In a school like Shree Pranse, this kind of program could definitely make something of a difference.

But the main question of this report was whether the program has a positive effect on teaching practices. Although it is again hard to tell with such a small sample size, the answer appears to be a tentative, qualified no.

Both pilot schools and non-pilot schools contained teachers who use good teaching methods and those who do not. Some of the good teachers use a lot of Tamang, some do not; some of the bad teachers use a lot of Tamang, others do not. A good teacher will, I think, be *open* to Tamang in the classroom; it is not good teaching to facetiously ask “What does *jinji* mean?” Perhaps if two teachers are identical except that one speaks a lot of Tamang and the other a lot of Nepali, the Tamang-speaking one will be better, because his students will be more comfortable, and for the abstract power-structure reasons cited above. But will his teaching methods be different? Only in the sense that the students are maybe a little more likely to participate.

Being a good teacher is a complicated process. Certainly, part of that process is being culturally appropriate to the students being taught, and maximizing their ability to operate well in the classroom. In the context of Nepal’s language-minority groups, that probably means, in early education, a significant amount of speaking in the students’ mother tongue. But it is far from the only factor at play, and probably not the most important one.

This does not mean that the medium-of-instruction program at hand is wrong-minded, or anything like that. It is, almost without a doubt, the educationally and sociopolitically correct path to take. But it is not enough, and not – from a purely educational standpoint – the

most pressing need in the Nepali school system right now. That need is teacher training. If high-quality teacher training can be integrated into the mother-tongue instruction program, so much the better; but blindly hoping that teachers will somehow become great initiative-takers creating their own interactive lessons just because they've been told to teach in a local language is not enough.

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