

# FREE EDUCATION? BLURRED PUBLIC-PRIVATE BOUNDARIES IN STATE-RUN SCHOOLING IN NEPAL

Uma Pradhan and Karen Valentin

“People don’t value things that they don’t pay for. We, therefore, take a small fee for admissions and for termly examinations. As a government school, we don’t take any other monthly tuition fee,” the head teacher of Sunaulo School<sup>1</sup> said, when explaining the reason for charging fees from students. Sunaulo School is a government school<sup>2</sup> located in a bustling hilly town, Nayadada, around 30 km away from Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal.<sup>3</sup> This quote reveals a common perception of the quality of schooling in contemporary Nepal, that is, the more you pay, the more you get. Implicit to this is an intricate relationship between the economic and symbolic value attributed to schooling and the instrumental role that monetary investments play in this. Moreover, it accentuates a blurring between the public and private domain, which increasingly characterizes the education system of Nepal. From an ethnographic perspective, this article focuses on local-level modes of funding in the public education sector of Nepal and explores how actors—school leaders, teachers and parents—navigate the financial landscape of the education system in their attempt to make educational provisions more accessible and legitimate.

While public education in Nepal is in theory open and free of charge to all until grade ten, it is widely acknowledged that there are numerous, more or less hidden education-related expenses, which are heavy burdens

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> As will be elaborated later in the article, since 2001 the official term used for government schools in Nepal is “community schools.” This, however, is a historically specific construct and we therefore maintain the term “government school” to emphasize the school-state relation.

<sup>3</sup> Sunaulo School is one of the oldest school in Nayadada and is very well regarded in the locality. At the time of the fieldwork the school had approximately 800 students and ran classes from 1–12, including civil engineering as a technical subject for students in Class 9–12.

to many families. While government schools do not charge any recurring monthly tuition fees, the one-off fees such as annual admission fees, termly exam fees, and costs of school uniform, tie, belt and diaries have become integral to the financing of public education. Other costs arise from an increasing demand for educational services offered by private actors and institutions to pupils of government schools and which by many parents, teachers, and school management committees are believed to be necessary in order to ensure “quality education” in the public sector. This include, as we will elaborate on later, various forms of private fundraising by the schools; purchases of higher priced, privately published but government-approved school textbooks; and extra-curricular tuition offered privately by government school teachers. Such practices, we argue, are grounded in a dominant discourse about the failing state education system in contemporary Nepal. These accounts often pit government schools against private schools on issues such as learning achievement of students, parental involvement, teacher effectiveness and school management. They also underscore that the performance of government schools is appalling compared to private schools, and that private schools are therefore able to provide “quality education,” which government schools are not. Moreover, experiences of public service provision being inefficient and excessively slow combined with a widespread mistrust against state institutions as being inherently corrupt have led to a decline in the legitimacy of the public education sector. While the specific cases presented in this article do not represent acts of illegality, they take place in blurred spaces between the legitimate-illegitimate, the formal-informal, regular-irregular and the public-private. The lack of transparency that defines such fuzzy spaces—or grey zones—easily gives rise to suspicions of various forms of corrupt behavior (Gupta 1995; Shore and Haller 2005; Anders and Nuijten 2007). This is also the case in the context of Nepal, where the issue of financial “irregularities” in the education sector, such as misuse of funds allocated to schools, has remained central to highly reported cases of corruption to the Government of Nepal (Bhatta and Budhathoki 2013).

Anchored in anthropology, this article explores how ideas of “quality” central to the market-led dynamics that increasingly drives the education sector of Nepal have infiltrated practices of financing public education among school administrators, teachers and parents. This helps solving actual financial problems in the everyday management of schools, partly to enhance what they believe counts as “quality education.” In other words,

there is both a pragmatic and an ideological dimension to it, which is related to the way in which schooling is valued in economic and symbolic terms in contemporary Nepal. The idea of “quality education” must be understood in the context of a pronounced two-tier education system, consisting of underfinanced, government schools for the poor and a diverse mass of private educational institutions. The latter cater to an increasingly broad category of the population, ranging from the lower middle-class sending their children to “budget boarding schools” to the wealthy upper-class with privileged access to prestigious educational institutions. The commercialization of the education system and the demand for private education is by no means new in Nepal, but the extent of it has escalated profoundly over the last two decades. The public education system, thus, increasingly functions on market mechanisms, which has led to a paradoxical situation in which government schools rely extensively on private funding and in the eyes of parents and students gain their legitimacy exactly through this association with private schooling. As we will return to later, it is equally important that the reclassification of government schools as “community schools” and associated ideas of community ownership have provided a new legitimizing frame for private fundraising in the public domain.

With its focus on the costs of “quality education” in the context of a blurred public and private education system in contemporary Nepal, this article combines a perspective on the symbolic currency of (modern) education key to debates in educational anthropology with one on value central to the anthropology of money. Existing scholarship in economic anthropology has pointed to the multiple meanings ascribed to money as both a means of exchange, a store of value and a unit of account (Muzio and Robbins 2017: 3) and to money as a social relation, a symbolic system and a material reality (Maurer 2006: 27). From an anthropological perspective money is an integral part of the hierarchies and networks of exchange through which it circulates and it thus underpins social relations and relations of conflict, hierarchy and interdependence (Hart and Ortiz 2014: 266). The present study does not deal with money in its material form, but with the monetary value of different educational practices and related to this shifting monetary relations and transactional systems in the context of a changing educational market consisting of new institutions and actors. The evolving landscape of educational financing and the deeply entrenched bifurcated model of the education system in Nepal, draw our attention to a range of

socio-cultural meanings, which surround monetary transactions (Parry and Bloch 1989). This is evident in the way in which parents and children chase private or semi-private institutional arrangements, where the value of the education provided is expected to be parallel to the money invested.

The case of Nepal highlights the complex ways in which education as a public good is produced and distributed more generally. This corresponds to ongoing discussions from other parts of the world on the significance of community and partnership financing as a source of supplementary funds for public education (Bray 1996; Gopalan 2013) and the increasing role of privately funded “shadow education” (Bray and Kwo 2013). The article therefore also contributes to broader scholarly debates on processes of overt and covert commercialization of education across the world and its implications on educational policies (Zhang and Bray 2017). Several recent studies have documented the increasing privatization of education in Nepal (Bhatta 2014; Joshi 2019; Karki 2016; Parajuli, Uprety and Gurung 2019), but this article advances the discussion by using “value” as an analytical tool to explore market-based impulses in government schools. It thereby sheds new light on the implications of costs related to “free” public education in Nepal. By bringing together insights from two distinct set of literatures, educational anthropology and economic anthropology, the aim of this article is to broaden our understanding of the changing relationship between the public and private domain in the education system of Nepal and related to this economic and symbolic values attached to different educational practices.

Arising from our shared interest in educational processes in Nepal, the paper is based on fieldwork conducted by Pradhan in Sunaulo School, Nayadada, between October 2016 and May 2017 and a follow-up visit in March-April 2019. It draws on data collected both inside the school premises and in the residential areas surrounding the school. It consists of observations stemming from daily visits to the school and attendance in various activities such as morning assemblies, classroom instructions, interactions with parents, students, teachers and other staff. Informal conversations and interactions with the school principal and teachers, within and outside the school, combined with regular “hanging out” in the school proved to be other important sources of information about the social and socio-political dynamics of the school. Drawing on long-term fieldwork in one school and grounded in anthropological theory, the argument of this article gains its validity not by seeking quantitative representation, but by situating the

empirical findings within the broader scholarship on commercialization of public education in Nepal and other parts of the world. The primary material from Sunaulo School thus is a window to understand enduring challenges to public education, especially in relation to various mechanisms to financing “free” education.

### **The Emergence of “Modern” Education and the Problem of Funding Public Education**

A burgeoning literature in educational anthropology has shown how Western-based, secular education has become linked with ideas of modernity, progress and development, not least in postcolonial societies, leading to promises of social mobility and social justice (Fuller 1991; Stambach 2000; Valentin 2005). Likewise, scholars of education in Nepal have pointed out that the establishment of modern mass education system in the 1950s, more than any other sector, marked the creation of a “new, modern Nepal” (Rappleye 2019: 105, also see Caddell 2007; Valentin 2011). In this changing educational context of Nepal, scholars have noted that, on the one hand, the idea of mass education is envisaged as that of a good citizen embodying the national identity, thereby contributing to nurture a sense of Nepali-ness in the population (Onta 1996; Skinner and Holland 1996). On the other hand, the Nepali education system also foregrounds the urbanized and Westernized self as a vision of development (Pigg 1992) and the idea of education as a process of modernizing the self (Valentin 2011). As a symbol of modernity and development, the provision of free and compulsory school education in Nepal was expected to help the country and its citizens “out of darkness” (NNPEC 1956: 71). This sentiment gained even more momentum with the education-related impetus in international development programs such as Education for All, Millennium Development Goal and Sustainable Development goal. This national and international commitment to education has resulted in ensuring a steady state provisioning and investment in education with more children in school than ever before. The 2017 education data shows that Nepal has a total of 35,601 schools (GoN 2017b). This is a significant increase from 321 schools recorded in 1951. According to the School Sector Development Plan, the public investment in education has increased from less than 2.9 percent in 1999 to over 4.7 percent in 2010 as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) [GoN 2016: 7].

The public education system in Nepal underwent a large-scale restructuring in 2001 when the Seventh Amendment of Nepal’s Education Act 1971 facilitated a massive transfer of all state-funded government schools to local communities and divided the schools in Nepal into two categories: privately-funded “institutional schools” and state-funded “community schools.”<sup>4</sup> This provision marked the Nepali state’s aim to transfer service delivery to the local level as well as a discursive shift towards the ideas of community ownership (Carney and Bista 2009; Bhatta 2011; Edwards 2011; Regmi 2017; Pradhan, Shrestha and Valentin 2019). The government of Nepal provides school grants (*bidhyālaya anudān*) to all the so called community schools that cover the cost of the salary of a designated number of teachers and school staff, school administration cost, and textbook cost. In addition to this, government scholarships are available to pupils belonging to specific categories such as Dalits, girls, children with disabilities, children of the Karnali region, who are seen to be particularly vulnerable. The budget for each school is calculated on the basis of the total number of students and the number of classes. The additional costs to run the “community schools” are expected to be covered by funds raised by the local community (GoN 2016; see also Parajuli, Uprety and Gurung 2019).

According to the School Sector Development Plan, “community schools” are the ones that have been established “on the request of local communities with their establishment and operations partly funded in kind and in cash by local communities” (GoN 2016: 123). Moreover, the financing of education is seen as a “shared responsibility of national, provincial and local governments and communities” (GoN 2016: 106). This rests on the assumption that community engagement in schooling will ensure ownership and more efficient governance, which is seen to be essential for students’ performance, quality of education, monitoring, and education planning (Carney and Bista 2009). However, as we have discussed elsewhere (Pradhan, Shrestha and Valentin 2019) such forms of ownership aimed for and engendered by formalized programs of decentralization must be understood in relation to socially embedded ideas of ownership. Communities’ active engagement in the establishment and maintenance of schools predate policy-driven forms of decentralization and does as such reflect a particular reciprocal relation between the public and the private domain. This relationship, however, has

<sup>4</sup> According to the Education in Figures 2017, there are 29,035 community schools and 6566 institutional schools in Nepal (GoN 2017b: 27)

changed with the commodification of education, both within and beyond government schooling.

Following a gradual expansion of a national mass education system and a concomitant institutionalization of the curriculum since the 1950s, a parallel tier of private education has emerged especially since the mid-1980s, when political and economic liberalizations opened up new spaces for a commercialized education market (Caddell 2007). Bhatta and Budathoki (2013: 3) note that private schools have been successful in creating an impression that they are “inherently superior to their public counterparts” and can “expand life chances and opportunities” of their students. Ranging widely from elite schools to “budget” schools most of the private schools brand themselves as English-medium and have gained much symbolic currency as a pathway to a better future, within or outside Nepal (Liechty 2003; Valentin 2005; Caddell 2007). This has resulted in a general lack of trust in the government schools, which cater mostly to low-income families. The government too has noted the decreasing number of students in “community schools” as clearly reflected in one of the government’s own reports:

In some community schools, students are decreasing for the several reasons such as poor performance of the schools, attraction of parents to institutional schools, and demographic changes in the catchment areas. (GoN 2017a: 40)

While the mental divide between state-run and private schooling seems to thrive well in the Nepali public, this paper highlights that such divisions are not clear-cut at all. The existing scholarship on privatization of education in Nepal has tended to focus on either comparative studies between private and government schools (Bhatta and Budathoki 2013; Thapa 2015) or exclusively on the dynamics of private schools (Caddell 2007; Joshi 2019) and government schools (Carney and Bista 2009; Karki 2016). The present study shows that government schools increasingly function on market mechanisms and justify themselves on the basis of parameters known from the private sector, while parents paradoxically adhere more and more towards private education. While some studies do acknowledge the “quasi-private policies” in government school or that they “imitate boarding school” (Bhatta and Budathoki 2013: 20; Bhatta 2014), this study explicitly analyses these market-led dynamics in public education in Nepal. The article also highlights

that while “quality education” is increasingly considered an important way to achieve human development and to improve the life chances of children, the discourse of quality itself has been commodified in Nepal’s public education landscape in a variety of ways. In the following, we present three examples—the practice of de facto fee-paying, the promotion of privately published textbooks and the provision of private tuition classes—which in different ways show how government schools have become reliant on private sources, not just to survive financially, but also to signal “quality education.” While such blurring of the public and private is by no means new to the Nepali education system, it has become increasingly clear that the so called “shared responsibilities” of local communities in financing government schools have not necessarily led to a strengthening of the public’s trust in these schools. In contrast, the discourse on decentralization and community ownership has rather contributed to obfuscate a growing commodification within the education system and served to keep alive a myth of “free education” (cf. Srivastava and Noronha 2016).

### Costs of “Free” Education

Sunaulo School was bustling with action. Parents and students were lined up in front of the accounts window. The new academic session for the school had just begun, and the school was busy registering the new cohort of students in different grades. The name and details of the students were registered in a book, once the payment of the annual registration fee was done, ranging from NRs 100–NRs 6,000, was made. Since Sunaulo School is a government school, officially known as “community” school, it is legally obligated to provide free education and not charge any monthly tuition fees. However, every year students and parents incur several additional costs such as annual registration fee, termly exam fee, uniforms, tie, belt, identity card, notebooks, pencils etc. These annual fees were commonly referred by teachers and parents as *bidhyālaya bharnā śulka* (school admission fee). In formal parlance, however, this fee is collected as *bidhyālaya sahayog śulka* (school support fee). According to the School Management Committee minutes, the annual school support fee for the academic year 2073 v.s. (2016–2017) ranged from NRs 100 (classes 1–5) to 1,000 (class 10) and then a steep jump to NRs 6,000 for class 9 and 10 in civil engineering. The school’s total income from student fees in the year 2070 v.s. (2013–2014) was NRs 2,808,430.



These modes of fundraising operate within the grey space of education governance in Nepal. On the one hand, “community schools” receive financial grants from the government and, on the other hand, they are, as stated in the School Sector Development Plan (GoN 2016: 123), expected to be “partly funded in kind and in cash by local communities” as they are formally managed by the communities. It is within this space between, the formal-informal that the public-private boundaries are gradually blurring in state-run schooling in Nepal. The head teacher later explained that the school does not collect any monthly tuition fee. However, he further explained that there are several expenditures that are not covered, e.g. additional staff paid through school’s own resources (*niji srot*) such as two teachers, a gardener and a security guard; the costs of additional furniture in staffroom and extra stationery; administrative costs of examinations. Schools typically recover these additional cost through other modes of fundraising, including annual fees from students.

As many government schools in Nepal, Sunaulo School mainly catered to families belonging to the lower socio-economic background.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the financial burden, the parents were willing to pay these fees as an investment in their children’s future. As one of the parents mentioned: “We are ready to make small sacrifices for our son’s future. This money will ensure good education. You reap what you sow.” Many parents often referred to the difficulties (*duhkha*) that they have experienced in their lives. The memories of the past and experiences of the present difficulties lead parents to untiringly hope for a better life for the next generation, regardless of its financial implications. When social norms purport the success in schooling as a way to a better future, additional school fees given to ensure good education appeared to be a small, but important investment.

Moreover, the school management believed that some payment of fees is beneficial to encourage parents’ involvement in the schools. It is strongly believed that when parents contribute, it helps to develop a sense of rights, ownership, and community participation. Using the English term teachers

<sup>5</sup> A survey of family background conducted with the students shows that the fathers’ occupation included farming, driver, mason, bus-driver, shopkeeper, plumber, electrician etc. Mothers’ occupation included farming, domestic work, tailoring etc. Many parents had not completed secondary school, and very few had a degree. Many students in this school—especially in the non-technical stream—were either first generation school goers or did not come from parents with higher education.

often expressed that the “value” of government school is less because the schools do not charge any fee and that anything free is not considered valuable. One of the teachers shared an experience of visiting different well-performing government schools around the country. He explained that all of them were collecting school fees. The teachers strongly held the opinion that it is important to raise the school fees if one is to expect the students to value the education that the school is providing. Another teacher shared the experience of a student questioning him on the “quality” of education in Sunaulo School by giving him an example that the fee for nursery (pre-school education) in other schools is NRs 1,100 and the fee for Class 11 in this school is only NRs 1,100.

While schools and authorities often measure “quality” in terms of performance such as number of students passed and examination scores, this example shows that for parents and even teachers there is another logic at stake too, namely that of money. In his conceptualization of value, Daniel Miller (2008: 1123) distinguishes between the work involved in giving a monetary worth to an object (“value as price”) and all that has significance precisely because it can never be reduced to monetary evaluation (“value as inalienable”). More generally, such distinction between “value as price” and “value as inalienable” opens for an understanding of the relation between the economic and the symbolic currency of education. Whereas the former is revealed through monetary investments made by families, institutions and the state and corresponding expectations of an economic pay-off through better jobs and increased productivity, the latter points to the intangible, but highly valued aspects of education such as accumulation of knowledge, enhanced social status and moral improvement. These are qualities, which are seen to be more or less permanent and, to use Miller’s term, inalienable. The price of education, thus, becomes an indicator of quality, not just in relation to expectations of better exam results, but also of a much broader set of qualities associated with an educated person (cf. Levinson and Holland 1996).

### **“Free” Textbooks and the Signal of Private Schooling**

Sunaulo School also signalled the “quality” in education by using textbooks similar to private schools. In practice, this meant using government-approved but privately published textbooks instead of the government-published textbooks. This practice had direct financial implication on students and parents. In Sunaulo School, a student studying in Class 8 spent approximately

a total of NRs 1,645 on textbooks. This included NRs 60 for Nepali textbook, NRs 60 for English, NRs 40 for Moral education, NRs 405 for Maths, NRs 425 for Science, NRs 350 for Social Science, and NRs 305 for Computer Science. The first three books were printed by the government and therefore cheaper than the rest of the books that were privately published, but approved by the Government of Nepal's Curriculum Development Centre. It is a prevalent practice for the schools to make an arrangement with selected shops to procure the set of books that the school has decided on, and the students and/or parents buy the books from the same shop. This practice is considered very convenient for the students and parents as they can find the books in one place. Likewise, it is easier for school management as they do not have to engage in the messy process of procuring and selling the books. In addition to this, the new students also pay NRs 100 for school diary, NRs 50 for the school calendar, NRs 150 for school tie and NRs 150 school belt. The school also conducts three internal examinations to assess the students' progress every term. The fee for each of these exams is NRs 50.

The textbooks in all "community schools" are covered by the government budget and should in principle be distributed by the schools directly to the students. Free education in Nepal includes free availability of textbooks to all children up to grade 10. However, the schools face several problems in this regard. Firstly, the distribution of textbooks throughout the country, especially in remote areas, is practically difficult to handle. In 2009, almost 39% of the children had not received free books by the second week of the academic year (Lohani, Singh and Lohani 2010: 365). And when they arrive on time, the number of books do not always match the total number of students. The government provides block grants to schools to purchase a complete set of textbooks for all students. Studies show that 51% of grade 1 students received books in the second week of the academic session, no information was available on whether and how many of the rest of the children received textbooks later in the year (Lohani, Singh and Lohani 2010). It is now a common practice for the local municipality to transfer funds for textbooks in the school's account. Sunaulo School received NRs 331,859.25 in the year 2070 v.s. and NRs 319,068 in the year 2071 v.s.

Secondly, schools also like to add government approved, but privately published textbooks, as long as it adheres to the curriculum guideline. The schools use textbooks developed within the curriculum framework prescribed by the government, from authorized private publishers and do

a better job of making textbooks available to students on time. There is an increasing trend towards this practice in schools, which have introduced English-medium education to ensure “quality education.” The privately published textbooks, including some international publishers, are priced higher than the government-published books. They also exceed the textbooks budget transferred by the local municipality to the school. In this context, the students buy the textbooks from the designated shops and bring their receipts to claim a reimbursement of NRs 200–900 per student regardless of the actual cost of the books.

Students and parents were generally very satisfied with the books used by the school, despite the additional expenditure. “This school uses the textbooks similar to the nearby boarding school,”<sup>6</sup> one of the parents shared and continued, “there is no difference in the quality of this school. I feel assured that my child is in good hands.” The use of textbooks, some of which are internationally published and also used by private schools to elevate the perception of government schools, shows the subtle ways in which private-public divide is gradually blurring in ways in everyday contexts of community school. Bhatta (2014) also notes that the “community schools” are adopting the strategy to become “boarding-like” by using English as the medium of instruction, adopting textbooks used by private schools and enforcing a dress code of belts and ties. This attraction to private schooling mainly attributes to the better performance of private schools, the so called institutional schools, in national-level examinations. According to the national assessment of student achievement (NASA) 2013 study for Grade 8, “students’ average achievement score in institutional schools is higher than that in the community” (GFA 2016: 83). This study also made an observation that “there is a strong association regarding the timeliness in textbook availability and student achievement” (GFA 2016: 83).

While the previous example illustrates a perceived correlation between the amount of money put into schooling and the quality of it, this one draws attention to the role of materiality, in this case textbooks, in signaling quality. While the provision of privately published textbooks certainly contributes to solve practical problems of a wide and timely distribution, it also serves as a marker of quality and status because of the association with private,

<sup>6</sup> The word “boarding” in the name of the school is used colloquially to signal that the school is privately run and teaches in English, even though the school does not necessarily provide hostel accommodation.

English-medium schools. Writing about transactional systems, Parry and Bloch (1989: 24) point to the relationship between long-term and short-term transactional orders concerning, respectively, the reproduction of the social or cosmic order and individual appropriation and competition. Long-term transactional orders are, positively associated with morality whereas short-term gains are morally undetermined. These two orders interrelate when goods appropriated through short-term cycles are converted into long-term transactional orders and change character (Parry and Bloch 1989: 25–26). Approached from this perspective, a school education, or elements of it such as English-medium books or as we will return to in the following section extra-curricular tuition, can be seen as goods that are purchased for short-term gains, for example to get better marks, to signal an international brand or to increase ownership. In a long-term perspective, however, they have the potential to transform into values of a different order, which linked to dominant ideas of the educated person (cf. Levinson and Holland 1996) are believed to be fundamental for the reproduction of the social order.

### **Paying for Results: The Importance of Tuition**

Sunaulo School also provides space for tuition classes in the mornings and evenings. These tuition classes cost students NRs 400–500 per student per subject and are taught in a group of 15–20 students in the school classrooms. The tuition is provided in different forms such as remedial class, revision lessons, and extra lessons and focuses mainly on the secondary-level students studying in Class 8, 9, and 10. The tuition classes are provided by the secondary-level teachers, mainly Maths, Science, and English teachers. The payment goes directly to individual teachers. Since the school teachers provide these tuition classes to the students in the same classrooms, it almost looks like regular school lessons. Nonetheless, parents and students consider such tuition a massive support to the ongoing classes in the school.

Private tutoring is often believed to have far-reaching implications on schooling performance and life opportunities (Bray 1996). Students attend these private tuition classes to obtain additional skills and techniques to pass the highly competitive school qualifying examinations. Many parents send their children to these tuition classes, despite incurring additional monthly cost of NRs 500. One of the parents shared: “When my child goes for tuition, I feel like he is working hard and studying better.” Sending their children to tuition classes served several functions for the parents and students. Firstly, they

were assured that their children would be in school and working on their studies. Secondly, the tuition classes mainly focus on exam format, past questions, and how to answer them. The students and parents, therefore, felt that it would lead to a better performance in the examinations.

Tuition in the education system is a reality that has been shaped by high-stake examinations with an underlying notion that private tuition increases the likelihood of “doing well” in school exams. One of the teachers who conducted tuition classes regularly in the morning explained: “Look, in reality, students are weak in studies. They need extra lessons, and they ask for it. I also take tuition classes for the bachelor and master level students, which pays more. But I still give my two hours to the students of my school; just with a hope to get better results for our school.” The school management also claims that the tuition classes improve the learning achievement of students and therefore contribute to strengthen the credibility of the school. Although some teachers, who did not provide tuition themselves, express discontentment with this practice of taking money from parents and neglecting the regular school classes, tutoring practice was generally considered good and positive. In addition to improving the performance in the examinations, the teachers also often commented that students work better if they have paid for it. One of the teachers explained: “If something is free, people do not value it. In tuition classes, the students question me for coming late. In regular classes, they are the ones who are late.” Although these private tuition classes are not provided by the government or any other local government authorities, they are considered reliable in getting better quality in education and therefore, an important part of regular educational practice in the government system. In the case of tuition classes, “quality” is sold and bought in the form of time; time that is considered more valuable than the one provided in government schools.

It is somewhat paradoxical that government schools in the name of tuition provide institutional space to run private educational activities, which draw on the schools’ own resources in the form of physical facilities and teachers’ time. At the same time, it is in the interest of the schools to host such activities as it helps them to build up an image of well-performing institutions. A potential threat to the public education system in general, such private supplementary tutoring, or “shadow education,” reveals a broader paradox. On the one hand, it may increase learning outcomes and potentially translate into social and economic development, but on the other hand, it also contributes to strengthen

the divides between those can afford and those who cannot and thereby reinforce social inequalities (Zhang and Bray 2017: 65).

### **Mirroring and the Question of Value**

As evident from the cases above, public schools gain much of their legitimacy from mirroring educational practices known from the private sector. Whether it is in the form of additional fees, books or extra lessons, private investments are becoming increasingly necessary for the sustenance of a heavily underfinanced state-run education system. While there are obvious economic reasons for schools to ask for direct and indirect contributions from the pupils, such practices are upheld by a strong belief in the worth of explicitly valued education services. The higher fees, the higher quality parents will expect from the school and the higher expectations the school has to the parents' involvement. Likewise, the supply of privately published textbooks sold at a comparatively high price responds to quite practical challenges of getting government books distributed on time in a country with very poor infrastructure. But as the example shows it is as much the symbolic value attached to books associated with "boarding schools" that shape parents and students' perception on the importance of privately published textbooks. Similarly, tuition classes provide the much-needed regular time and attention from the teachers to ensure the student learning and completion of syllabus. At the same time, it is also enabled by the moral evaluation of monetary investments in educational practices seen to be more effective in producing results.

Despite the well-acknowledged idea of education as a public good, and the ongoing public investment in school education, the increasing commercialization and commodification of education point towards the way in which money functions to increase perceived value of a commodity, in this case formal education. These market-based arguments on education are, on the one hand, deeply embedded in an idea of the failure of the state's capability to provide welfare to its citizens. On the other hand, it also reveals the "fiction of finance" (Maurer 2006: 25) in shaping the morality of exchange and the ways in which social value comes to be allocated to different things. As Bloch and Parry (1989) argue, it is not the particularities of the money but the social system of exchange that determine its value. The dual system of education in Nepal, bifurcated into government schools and private schools, indicates this social value of money where fee-paying

private schools are often regarded as better than free government schools. As discussed in the previous sections of this article, this close association of the social value of money and its consequences on the symbolic values attached to different educational practices has facilitated the increasing tendency in government schools to mirror private school practices leading to a further blurring of public-private boundaries.

While mirroring such private school educational practices are justified as necessary for practical needs of government schools, the motivation of the students and the accountability of the school towards parents, these mirroring practices are a way for government schools to gain legitimacy. These processes of constructing legitimacy draws attention to monetary exchanges and values attached to different educational practices in the two-tier educational system of Nepal. It is through every day and gradual investments in educational practices that the parents perceive their children accumulating knowledge, social status and modernity as highly valued expected outcomes of school education. It also shows us the complex ways in which symbolic value of education is produced and distributed. It thereby raises questions on the scope and content of education as a public good when it is reliant on private funds and market logic.

The gradual commercialization of public education is an ongoing phenomenon around the world, including South Asia. Usually embedded in meta-narratives of “ownership,” “partnership” and “community” (Cornwall 2007), these neutralizing ideas conceal the unequal power relation between different social actors, shift the responsibility to individual actors, and do not question the persistent underfunding of public education (Srivastava and Su-Ann 2010). The current study, thus, points towards the need to question the everyday implications of policies that transferred the education service delivery to the local level and encouraged ideas of community ownership.

## **Conclusion**

Education is widely accepted as an important public good and similar to many countries around the world, the Government of Nepal therefore has committed itself to securing free schooling up to grade 10. And yet, as this article has demonstrated government schools rely heavily on supplementary funding both in order to survive financially and to gain legitimacy in the context of an increasingly commercialized education system and an ever declining faith in state-run schooling. The private education market has long



flourished in Nepal with education being a commodity by which people can claim status and class membership (Liechty 2003). Likewise, the practice of private investment in government schools is not a new phenomenon in Nepal. State-run school education has historically been supported by individuals and local communities, partly through reciprocal relationships and shared ownership (Pradhan, Shrestha and Valentin 2019), partly through supplementary donations demanded by the schools (Valentin 2005). However, with the transfer of all government-funded schools to local communities with the Seventh Amendment of Nepal's Education Act 1971 in 2001 a discursive shift towards the ideas of community ownership created new institutional spaces for raising additional funds to support government schools in the name of "community schools." This, along with the increasing comparison with private schools, has become critical for government schools to justify their reliance on private funding and what makes them successful in obtaining such supplementary funding is their ability to signal quality in ways that are "private-like." Through ethnographic evidence and by examining the relationship between the economic and symbolic value of education this article, thus, has demonstrated how the idea of "quality" in itself has become commodified.

With a focus on the actual costs of "free" education and local-level modes of educational financing of government schooling in Nepal, this article contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on increasing commercialization of the public education system, not just in Nepal, but across the world in the context of widespread neoliberal forces. It particularly emphasises the ways in which private-public dynamics in education coexist, compete, and rely on each other. These complex interactions blur the boundaries between public and private domain in the education system of Nepal and reveal an interconnection between economic and symbolic values attached to different educational practices. Such processes of constructing legitimacy compel us to acknowledge the new manifestations in commercialization of education that insist on market-style models and that sidestep the norms that characterize education as public good.

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### Biographical Notes

**Uma Pradhan** is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow (Oxford School of Global and Areas Studies) and Junior Research Fellow (Wolfson College) at the University of Oxford. Prior to this, she was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow (2016–2018) at the Department of Educational Anthropology, School of Education, Aarhus University, where she was engaged in a collaborative project on “Locating Public Finance Dynamics in Education in Nepal.” Her research focuses on power-laden dimensions of education and examines the

interconnection between state, society and schooling. Email: uma.pradhan@area.ox.ac.uk

**Karen Valentin** holds a Ph.D. in anthropology and is an Associate Professor at the Department of Educational Anthropology, School of Education, Aarhus University. Since the mid-1990s she has been engaged in various research in Nepal on the relationship between mass-schooling and nation-building, educational strategies among the urban poor and education-related migration. She is currently engaged in an interdisciplinary, Danida-funded research project, “Locating Public Finance Dynamics in Education in Nepal” (2015–2021), a collaboration between Martin Chautari, Kathmandu University and Aarhus University. Email: kava@dpu.dk