**Quality in the Classroom, a Conference on School Education**

**4-7 April 2013 Kathmandu, Nepal**

I was not quite sure what to expect when having only just arrived in the country to work on a teacher education programme, I was invited to attend the first ever international conference on school education to be held in Nepal.

Hosted by the Rato Bangala Foundation in collaboration with the Department of Education, the conference brought together a range of stakeholders, including teacher trainers, school teachers, planners, university professors, policy makers, I/NGO’s , UN agencies and government education representatives to discuss ideas and share best practice. Rato Bangala is a co-educational day school and like the Kathmandu International Study Centre (KISC) EQUIP that I am working with, also houses a teacher training institute which strives to replicate its innovative teaching methods and quality instruction in schools across Nepal. The Rato Bangala Foundation has been working in partnership with the Department of Education for Nepal (DOE, Ministry for Education, Government of Nepal) in the field of teacher training and education for the last 10 years and this conference is partly the result of the Foundation becoming a recipient of the UNESCO-Hamdan Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Prize for Outstanding Practice and Performance in Enhancing the Effectiveness of Teachers, 2012.

On arriving for the first day of the conference, I certainly had not expected to be part of an opening ceremony and launch dinner attended by the President of Nepal, the Director General for Education, the former Deputy Director of UNICEF and Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations and the Norwegian Ambassador. Neither had I envisaged in this politically unstable, developing county to find an extremely efficient and well-coordinated 4 day education conference, hosted to perfection in the grounds and school buildings of the Rato Bangala School. Every detail had been carefully and thoughtfully planned, from the welcome and registration to the inspiring conference film that set the focus from the outset. On each day over 700 delegates from 35 districts in Nepal, together with a few dozen overseas visitors like myself, came together to be inspired and challenged by a choice of 6 different presentations and 12 workshops. Speakers and presenters were from Nepal, Australia, Canada, Chile, Columbia (on-line) Bangladesh, Finland, India, Pakistan, Tanzania, USA and the UK. Significantly many of the key speakers were influential women leaders, including Ms. Shanta Dixit Director of Rato Bangala School and Chair of the Foundation, Dr. Baela Raza Jamil founder of the Children’s Literacy Festival in Pakistan and Ms. Nafis Sadik CEO of the Escuela Nueva, Columbia.

Nepal has only relatively recently (1951) come from being a fully undeveloped country with 3% literacy, life expectancy of 25 years and a mainly agrarian economy. The country has made substantial progress in its access to education but the picture is still mixed with poorly trained teachers in many areas and 10% of children that remain without proper access to education. Significantly the drop-out rate of those who enrol at grade 1 is huge, so that in some areas only 70% actually complete their primary education and less than 1/3 reach grade 10.

Despite these obstacles, this conference showed that Nepal is forging ahead to enable not just ‘education for all’ but ‘quality education for all’. Presenters and workshop leaders engaged delegates in considering amongst other things how to make classrooms more child-centred and more able to prepare them for life-long learning. They focused attention on the need for different ways of working in the classroom, so that student’s develop as critical thinkers and not just receivers of knowledge. There was considerable focus on the key role of teachers to create opportunities for their students to be more globally aware in a changing world and for the teachers themselves to reflect on their practice and have opportunities for continuous professional development. Concerns about too much focus on working to tests in a narrow curriculum and too little on inspiration, critical thinking and creativity seemed all too familiar.

It was encouraging and a privilege to have been at one of the most inspiring and innovative conferences I have attended in over 25 years working in education. It provided a fascinating insight into how a developing country sets about bringing about change through its education. The opportunity to exchange ideas with others from across Nepal and from overseas has already informed and contributed to the end of conference ‘Kathmandu Commitment’ which will in turn inform Nepal’s own School Sector Reform Programme (SSRP 2009-2015) and help to build towards quality in the classroom for Nepal.

The obstacles for Nepal are huge but if the energy, enthusiasm and goodwill shown at this conference are an indication of how change can come through working together for a better future, then children’s education in Nepal may be in safe hands. On the final day, one of the political strikes that regularly disrupt life in Kathmandu, meant no cars, buses or other forms of motorised transport could be used throughout the city and beyond. Still the conference was full, with some delegates walking 2hrs each way to attend. As one of the keynote speakers commented, no matter what, ‘the creativity of this country will come out’.

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