

Education and social transformation: towards an alternative paradigm

‘There is no more powerful transformative force than education – to promote human rights and dignity, to eradicate poverty and deepen sustainability’ (UNESCO 2015).

Education has long been considered a force for social transformation, influencing teaching-learning approaches and policy directions, including the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. My early experience in Bajhang, Doti and Bajura as a VSO teacher trainer on the Seti Project (Education for Rural Development Project) strongly shaped my role as educator, policy activist and researcher today. In the 1980s, I did not question the dominant view that formal education – particularly literacy - would kickstart development in the Far Western region and initiate changes in economic opportunities, livelihoods and above all, gender relations. However, the ‘literacy first’ approach common at that time often led to a narrow focus on education as an entry point to development programmes. Looking at the political developments, radically improved communication, transport and ICT over the past forty years, I now see what a strong part everyday learning beyond and outside schools has also played in facilitating social change in this region of Nepal. Alongside educational providers, commercial actors have provided important opportunities for on-the-job training and learning through introducing new livelihood activities. Through social media, political activism, mobility and changing governance structures, alternative learning spaces have emerged that are reshaping gender and caste inequalities.

My presentation sets out to explore the assumptions behind the dominant educational research and policy paradigm, which still informs so many education programmes across the world. I will explore how policy makers could take greater account of the complexity of relationships between diverse forms and practices of learning, literacy, education and livelihoods. A theoretical framework around social transformation, as opposed to the usual development lens, is proposed in order to analyse the broader unplanned processes of change and informal learning. I will look at the implications of taking this perspective on social change and education for our discussions about the Sudur Paschim Pradesh during this conference.

Biography

Anna Robinson-Pant is Professor of Education at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, UK. She holds the UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation, a partnership between seven universities, including Tribhuvan University CERID and Kathmandu University School of Education. Recent UNESCO Chair projects include policy, training and research initiatives on family literacy and indigenous learning in Nepal, Ethiopia, Malawi and the Philippines, and commissioned research in Nepal and Malawi for the UNV *State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2022*. Anna began her career in Nepal as a VSO teacher trainer in the Far West of Nepal, before going on to work with various NGOs as a planner then researcher. Her ethnographic research conducted with two adult literacy programmes in Nepal - *Why eat green cucumber at the time of dying? Exploring the link between women's literacy and development* - received the UNESCO International Award for Literacy Research in 2001. Since moving into UK higher education, she has conducted participatory research with international students, exploring intercultural learning, research ethics and university internationalisation policy. Her research on the geopolitics of academic writing led her to develop a writing-for-publication mentoring programme with the journal *Compare*.

