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Why is it important to emphasise the different ways in which pupils and their families value education in South Asia? An anthropological perspective.

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Abstract

Recent ethnographies of South Asia are increasingly concerned with the question of how students and their families value education. A closer look at these anthropological works reveals that the formulation of this new research question arose from the double observation that on the one hand education in South Asia is especially valued by the middle class as a powerful tool for upward mobility in society, while on the other hand ethnographic descriptions of people's experiences with education unveil a striking discrepancy between people's expectations and actual outcomes of education. This observation also encourages a critical rethinking of the frequent association between education and development, and urges a closer scrutiny of restraining factors, which have a negative effect on education outcomes.

Introduction

Education in South Asia is the object of scrutiny by researchers from different disciplines. For example sociologists look at the link between education and social change, such as the effects of maternal education on fertility rates and child immunization (e.g. Drèze & Murthi 2000; Vikram, Vanneman & Desai 2012), economists are especially interested in the financial returns of investing in education (e.g. Fulford 2014), historians focus their attention on the historical development of education, especially in the colonial period (e.g. Kumar 2014; Whitehead 2003) and in relation to missionary activity (e.g. Bellenoit 2007; Sengupta 2011), and scholars of religious studies display a particular interest in the role of religious education in the region (e.g. Riaz 2008; Sikand 2003; 2009).[1] Against this background of the social and economic aspects, and the historical and religious particularities of education in South Asia, anthropologists have recently formulated a whole new kind of question. Based on ethnographic case studies, they attempt to explain the different ways in which students and their families value education. By discussing some key authors and their works and findings in the field, I elucidate in this essay why the recent ethnographic emphasis on this aspect of education is such a relevant issue today.

[1] These are only some examples of the mass of studies that came up after a search on relevant works published between 2000 and 2015.

Education narratives in official discourse: development and empowerment

In official discourse adopted by governments, NGOs, policy makers and international organisations, education is often portrayed in line with the influential work of Amartya Sen (1999) as a powerful vehicle for bringing about positive social change in society (Foerer 2012: 346). Education is considered to be especially valuable since it provides skills that allow people to live more secure lives and to acquire better jobs. Literacy, in particular, is viewed as having an empowering effect because it gives people the ability to participate in politics and to demand more rights. It moreover opens up new opportunities for vulnerable groups such as women and people from lower classes (Da Costa 2008: 283). As Madsen (2006) has shown, there exists a kind of global discourse on schooling that accords a central place to individual development (227) and that reasons from the supposition that a universal model of good education is possible (231).

The discussions about education as encountered in this discourse are often conducted on an abstract level, with quantitative analyses of raw numbers being translated in conclusions about the level of development a country has achieved. Representative of this approach is an article by Kaushik and Ramani (2011) which evaluates the performance of India in what they call "narrowing the educational achievement gap" between privileged sections of society and socially disadvantaged groups on the basis of numeral data from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). In view of the relatively high ratio of poorly performing students eligible for government-reserved positions in these data, they conclude that India should concentrate more on different aspects of education such as a standardised assessment system, primary education for all, and student support services. This approach and conclusion are thus completely in line with a development-focussed view that contemplates education as the ultimate solution, even for problems within the education system itself.

Other research has also pointed to the important role reserved for women in these narratives. The common view is that female education not only effectuates the social advancement of girls, but that it moreover is a driving force for the development of a society as a whole. The educated woman is expected to be better equipped to make the right choices when it comes to family planning, birth control, and the upbringing of her children, who in their turn are more likely to make it to developed members of the middle class (Donner 2006: 372). In other words, women are believed to learn to value the importance of education as a means for upward mobility for their own children. Here the relationship between education and

development is more circular than in the previous approach: education leads to development, and development through education in its turn generates a wider appreciation of the value of education.

Another consequence of this stance towards education as a route towards development is that nations came to think of schools as perfect sites for social transformation. Caddell (2005) explains how private schools in Nepal, while drawing inspiration from a global rhetoric in which education serves to transfer upon students a “developed” habitus, equate a developed person with a good Nepali citizen. In this way, “development” became a national project in which a particular vision of the nation was endorsed in schools, modelled on what elite groups understood by being a developed Nepali citizen. Caddell shows how in doing so, schools ignored and reproduced existing social and political inequalities in the country. This study consequently illustrates how schools are ambiguous and subjective sites that interpret the project of development they are endowed with in their own way. Yet in spite of this, the education-development correlation is adopted by very large segments of society, including the middle classes.

Education narratives among the middle classes: cultural capital

In recent ethnographies of South Asia, scholars have observed that there appears to be a link between the way in which education is valued and the expansion of the middle classes in the region over the last few decades. The increased anthropological interest in studying the Indian middle class is in itself a consequence of the appreciation of the fact that there are social and demographic transformations going on in the country, which have the potential to exert their altering influence in a range of societal spheres, from the economic arena to the political domain. The number of people who consider themselves to be part of the Indian middle class has swollen, and so has the amount of questions surrounding this phenomenon. Scholarly attention has focussed on the association of the Indian middle class with the politics of liberalisation of the 1990s (Fernandes 2006), economic reform, changing labour markets (Fernandes 2000), globalisation, and consumption (Dickey 2013; Lukose 2005). In these analyses, education is considered to be a central component of what defines the middle classes. Fernandes for example states that English higher education is associated with the middle-classes in India, and that lower classes could aspire to become part of the middle class by obtaining certain diplomas (2006: xviii). In other words, in this view certain types of

education and personal intellectual achievements are both a feature of the middle classes and a means for upward mobility.

This approach matches with the above discussed discourse of the policy-makers that stresses the direct connection between education and development. A study by Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2004a) has shown that the same conceptuality is adopted and repeated by sections of the Indian middle class. They observed in their fieldwork in western Uttar Pradesh how young, educated men from Muslim and Dalit backgrounds, when they are confronted with unemployment despite the fact that they are well educated, resort to the narrative that education has made them at least more developed. Instead of questioning the merits and purpose of education in the light of their inability to find a job, they highlight the characteristics inherent to “developed” people that they have acquired through education, as a strategy to maintain their identities as civilised and cultured individuals. To put it differently, while these young men in first instance value education as a way towards acquiring respected jobs and entering the middle class, the nonfulfillment of their aspirations leads them to revalue being educated as a goal in itself, drawing on the generally accepted and promoted idea that education means development.

Education for the middle classes has consequently also become a symbol of social status, whether or not it leads to a good job. As Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery in another article observe (2005b: 3, 32), their findings about the young men in north India are in line with Bourdieu’s theory that disadvantaged social groups invest in education because this provides them with “cultural capital” (1984), i.e. such knowledge, skills, manners and behaviour that are necessary to gain social distinction. Education is thus valued because it is a gateway to specialised knowledge, which is appraised as a quality in itself, besides the fact that the acquisition of it is necessary for securing a well-paid job (Béteille 1991: 6).

But the connection between what constitutes the middle classes and education goes further than the observation that education translates in higher (middle class) social status either through a secure job or through the accumulation of cultural capital. Morarji (2014) has observed that the outlook on education as leading to development is essentially a middle-class ideal represented as universal, which is articulated by middle-class teachers and principals in schools and in this way exactly reproduces notions of rural backwardness. As a result, the common view in which education is perceived as a timeless positive institution that generates development does not recognise that education is also a site of social practices and interaction,

which might render its effects more ambiguous (Da Costa 2008: 284-5). This thought has urged anthropologists to turn their attention to the way in which parents and children value education on the ground, in settings where the lofty promises of higher class ideals about education seldom live up to the expectations.

Experiences of education and its value on the ground

The perceived link between education, social mobility, and development, which defines official and middle class discourse on education, is of course not without foundation. Several ethnographies have observed that the principal incentive to pursue formal education is the hope to leave behind manual and agricultural work and to find employment in white-collar job sectors (Caddell 2005: 4; Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery 2005a: 2085; Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery 2008). Besides that, it has been noted that schooling in itself can lead to a devaluation of physical and agricultural labour (Da Costa 2008: 288). Yet in practice, few graduates find the job that they aim for and a lot of them feel compelled to return to the fields. It is exactly this failure of the education system to provide people with the necessary tools to help them to lift themselves out of poverty that raises questions about the value of education for these people.

Da Costa argues that on the ground education is valued in a range of different ways depending on specific contexts and experiences (2008: 285, 289). People may for example recognise the need for their children of being educated and literate so that they might live better lives than their parents did, and at the same time suffer from an even more severe form of poverty because education requires expenses they cannot afford (Da Costa 2008: 294). These kinds of financial obstacles that people face for sure limit the transformative power of education, which is so often praised in official and middle class contexts. Besides a lack of economic capital, a lack of social capital also influences the way in which education is valued. Froerer (2011) shows how inhabitants of the same rural *adivasi* (tribal) village in Chhattisgarh in Central India, called Mohanpur, value education in very different ways because they are divided in a Christian community of which the children mostly attend a Catholic mission boarding hostel, and a Hindu community who send their children to a local government school. Thanks to its connections to other national and international Catholic institutions the Catholic missionary school was better equipped to provide its students with the required social relations and networks to find a job after graduation, and education in the missionary school consequently helped to overcome the discrimination other tribals face.

The Hindu population meanwhile, as Froerer more elaborately explains in another article (2012), looks at education in a more negative and ambiguous way. Although the recent construction of a primary school in the Chattisgarh village has increased school enrolment and literacy rates, attitudes towards education have not changed at the same pace. While government and NGO efforts have accomplished that education up to Class 5, the last grade of primary education, is generally viewed as valuable by the village inhabitants for the cultural capital it yields, parents do almost never seek more advanced education for their children and do not consider formal schooling to be of decisive importance for a child's wellbeing in the future. Instead, they still regard marriage to be a more effective way of improving one's social position, and accordingly they do not deem it necessary to educate their daughters after fifth grade. The logic behind this is that a girl who combines sufficient literacy with the right household management skills receives the best marriage proposals. Parents in Mohanpur in other words do not see education as a way towards economic capital in the form of a job, but in the form of a more favourable marriage.

The girls who attend the primary school in the village themselves however cherish a different perspective. Froerer argues that a lot of them hoped to be able to continue their education not because of the promise of a future consumerist lifestyle, and neither because they would have been repeating the viewpoints of their teachers, but simply because they aspire to enter into other professions than the agricultural occupations their parents are involved in (2012: 347-8). Older girls on the other hand, who were withdrawn from school by their parents, in course of time changed their views on education. While they in the first instance regretted not having been given the opportunity to carry on with school and to fulfil their dreams of becoming a teacher or a nurse, they gradually became more compliant with the expectations of their parents, and looked back at their time in school as a valuable asset for their later married life (2012: 350).

Froerer's general conclusion is that the expectations and aspirations of both children and parents with relation to education were profoundly informed by social, cultural and economic conditions. Even though the narrative of schooling as social mobility has reached remote places and has made primary schooling a more obvious matter, the lack of social and economic capital that these people possess has made it impossible for them to translate their newly acquired cultural capital into actual social advancement. Consequently, they only value education in accordance to what is realizable, namely as an extra form of cultural capital useful for marriage purposes. Also Srivastava (2006) reaches the same conclusion about the

reasons why parents value education for girls, arguing that they send their daughters to study so they can marry a good match. This illustrates again how situations on the ground differ significantly from the theories that relate education invariably to social mobility, because they do not take constraining local factors into account (2012: 354-5).

Another well-known confining social phenomenon in India, apart from gender and financial means, that has an influence on the experiences of educated people, is caste. Dickey (2013) states that caste affects the value placed on education and that caste discrimination has an effect on access to education (224). This is also endorsed by Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2004b; 2005a) in their research among educated Dalit men. Although affirmative action policies have made education easier accessible to Dalits, their caste background as former untouchables puts heavy restraints on their chances to translate their schooling certificates into salaried jobs. This moreover had important consequences for the way in which these Dalit communities came to value education. The failure and resulting frustration of a lot of them made Dalits rethink the value of education and they are now more reluctant to invest in formal schooling, even though they still value educational knowledge and skills. This case study illustrates how inequalities based on caste cannot be straightened out by simply encouraging education for all. More structural changes for disadvantaged groups are needed to be able to convert their cultural capital into social improvement.

Furthermore, also in contexts where caste has a less restrictive influence on people's possibilities, class considerations still have a profound effect on educational choices. With regard to middle-class families in an urban environment, Sancho (2013) observes that parents, who themselves have managed to slightly improve their social and economic status, attach great value to the performances of their children because they envision for them to continue this upward movement of their family through employment in even more prestigious and well-earning jobs in sectors such as engineering and medicine. While this attitude towards education manifests itself in the large amounts of money that middle-class parents invest in expensive schools with good reputations and entrance coaching, Sancho shows how parents' aspirations are paradoxically combined with the narrative that students are on their own to make it happen. These then are the characteristics of a new extremely positive middle-class appreciation of education, which perceives the opportunities for the educated hard-working middle-class youth in a globalised world as endless.

Conclusion

In recent ethnographies of education, anthropologists have spared no pains to record the different ways in which students and their families in South Asia value education. This research question presented itself as a consequence of several observations regarding the topic. A first point to why the question of the value of education is perceived as a salient issue, is that the rationale of education as a gateway to better employment opportunities, social mobility and universal development in reality almost never becomes actual fact. Education has become part of a wider narrative propagated by higher and lower sections of society in which it is invariably portrayed as an ideal route upwards for individuals to climb the social ladder, and forwards for a community as a whole towards a more developed society. However, in ethnographical studies that look at specific cases of individuals who in one way or another have to reflect on education, the effects education has on people's lives is seldom as straightforward and positive as portrayed in these narratives. In other words, there seems to exist a discrepancy between what people imagine and what they are confronted with in reality. This then prompts the question if people's attitudes towards education change once they realise that their expectations will not be actualised, or if they perhaps come to value it for other reasons.

Secondly, the fact that education seems to be a vital component for the emergence of the new middle classes in South Asia has led researchers to take a closer look at the exact relationship between the two. Education in this context is not only a particular element of *middleclassness*, the middle classes also value education in a specific way. While the obvious and widely expressed incentive for people to invest in education is their belief that it creates opportunities within the job market, the middle class moreover appreciates education because of the cultural capital it provides, next to a higher social status and a deeper sense of self-respect. In addition, the discourse that education has almost unlimited transformational powers, an idea linked to the perceived connection between education and development, manifests itself most strongly in middle-class milieus.

All of these observations revolving around education in South Asia can of course not be translated in absolute generalisations. Every ethnographic description records a whole range of different and highly personal attitudes, reactions, and experiences surrounding education. As Da Costa asserts, in anthropological research on education attention should always be given to context, process and particularity (2008: 285). If one however recognises the

significance of such factors on people's lives, this almost automatically calls into question the usefulness and veracity of the education-development correlation, it urges the need to take into consideration possible constraining factors which could limit or distort the effects of education, and it generates the question of how people actually value education on the ground.

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