



Observations on schooling in the Tibetan diaspora versus schooling in Tibet

Ellen Bangsbo

The educational attainments of Tibetans in the Tibetan areas are still among the lowest in China. There is still a high level of illiteracy amongst Tibetan children in Tibet (TAR) and low attendance in school can be due to disadvantageous geographical conditions in mountainous areas, curriculum is often seen as irrelevant and of poverty and a need for the children to do domestic labour. In contradiction nearly all of the Tibetan children in exile in India and Nepal complete school up to the 5th or the 10th grade. My paper looks at different aspects, which are significant factors for Tibetan children to attend and complete schooling in Tibet versus in India and Nepal.

The first Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal chose to send their children to Catholic boarding schools in Mussoorie, Dehra Dun, Kalimpong and Darjeeling and the majority of this generation in exile never learned to write Tibetan. Since then the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala or private innovators have funded many Tibetan schools in India and Nepal. Traditional restrictions no longer prevail and some Tibetan schools even accept the mixture of lay children, monks and nuns. Like in Tibet schools in India and Nepal are obliged to follow official requirements of curriculum and exams, but they are permitted to add teachings on Tibetan history, language and culture. Tibetan parents in diaspora acknowledge and welcome the need for their children to learn English as well as Hindi and/or Nepali respectively.

Tibetans in Tibet are obliged to study subjects that are taught in Chinese and some students drop out as they fail to qualify in the Chinese language examinations. The use of the Chinese language as a teaching medium is being increased in primary schools and consequently children have few chances of learning to read and write Tibetan. Since the mid 1980s, Tibetan children in Tibet have been offered state scholarship to complete their high school in other provinces. Critics are concerned that this will create a local 'patriotic' elite and a cultural uprooting of the children selected. The Chinese government has also proposed that teachers should be recruited from China in order to

develop education in Tibet and that a closing of village schools should be transformed into 'key-schools'.

The question is if more education and 'more educated teachers' actually equate with better quality of education? Many schools are geared towards students attaining high scores in exams and often parents feel that it is of greater importance for their children to know about their language and religion than learning mathematics and science. Traditional education is delivered in one way as strongly disciplinary 'root-learning' methods with not enough attention paid to informal education. However, in modern education methodology the methods to deliver education in the classroom are regarded as crucial. UNICEF characterises a right-based child-friendly school as being a child-centred education system, which promotes children's basic rights and access to a supportive learning environment, knowledge, skills and competencies, and values needed for continuing life-long learning (UNICEF 2002). The teachers' role is no longer just to convey knowledge, but also in solidarity with the students to function as starters and to teach the students independent learning and individual initiative.

With the understanding that children are not just passive recipients of knowledge transmitted via the teacher and the textbook some international NGOs aim that the traditional root-learning education should give way to alternatives. By collaborating with the official Tibetan educational system in Tibet (TAR) the aim is to renew the educational approach and enable local teachers to use a child-centred learning method. It is expected that such teaching methods will increase the level of school attainments and participation. This is essential as the Tibetan community needs to be educated as a future Tibetan elite requires educational skills in order to gain influence in a modern society, be it either Tibetan, Chinese, Asian or International. My paper will focus on which way- and – how a method of renewed schooling can increase Tibetan children's self-understanding and ability to function and act in society. In exile this can be done through a renewed Tibetan culture friendly school curriculum and as this, due to present political restrictions, is unthinkable in Tibet, a revised pedagogical teaching methodology might instead be a means to teach children how to think and act independently.

References: UNICEF 2002, Shaeffer et. al. The Global Agenda for Children: Learning for the 21st Century.