Finding hope in troubled times

Education and protection for children in Nepal

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Over the last decade, a civil war in Nepal claimed the lives of over 14,000 people and left the country tattered and worn out. By 2005, Maoist insurgents controlled much of the countryside, and Nepal's people faced pressure from both the rebels and government security forces. After nationwide riots and turmoil in April 2006, the first tenuous steps were taken towards achieving a peaceful resolution and an inclusive government. The process still continues.

This report describes the findings of a study undertaken in some Save the Children program schools in Nepal during the tumultuous 2005-2006 school year. A primary objective of the research was to look at the capacity of these schools to be a protective space for children in the context of the conflict and other challenges in their lives. "Protection" is defined broadly here to cover threats not only to children's safety but to their general welfare, their ability to cope with difficulties, and the promise of their future.

There is growing recognition of the effect that a good school can have in stabilizing life for children during times of upheaval.[1] But it remains more common for organizations to turn to psychosocial support projects as a way to maintain or restore children's resilience, rather than "just" strengthening schools. This study takes the perspective that children's welfare in times of violence and upheaval is most productively addressed through measures that boost family and community strength and that provide secure, predictable routines and environments.[2] Schools are vitally important in this regard and offer critical opportunities for sustained support, not only for children but for their families and communities.

Nepali parents are well aware of the role that schools can play. *"These are troubled times,"* said one father. *"Many evil deeds are being done, and educating our children is the best way to make sure they grow up acting differently."* This father echoes the belief that education does not simply serve society, it also helps to create it.[3] This research was a chance to see what kind of society Save the Children's schools have been helping to create during a challenging time in Nepal. The findings demonstrate that even a program operating under serious constraints can provide breathing space for children, and critical support in their development as secure, confident, capable citizens.

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[1] See for instance Nicolai, S and C Triplehorn (2003) The role of education in protecting children in conflict, HPN Network Paper #42, ODI, London; Wright, C (2005) UNICEF Education Strategy 2006-2015, UNICEF, New York

[2] Boyden, Jo (2003) Children under fire: challenging assumptions about rhildren's resilience, Children, Youth and Environments, Vol 13, No. 1; International Save the Children Alliance (1996) Promoting Psychosocial Well-Being Among Children Affected by Armed Conflict and Displacement: Principles and Approaches. Working Group on Children Affected by Armed Conflict and Displacement, Working Paper 1. Geneva: International Save the Children Alliance.

[3] Postman, N, The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School, Vintage Books, New York, 1996.

Background

Education in a time of conflict

Primary education in Nepal has been extremely weak at the best of times. As in many poor countries, resources are inadequate, and schools are often overcrowded and poorly maintained. Parent involvement is minimal, and there is little oversight from the government education system. Many teachers are badly trained, frustrated, lacking in commitment, and frequently absent for days at a time. Teaching methods focus on rote memorization, and physical punishment and humiliation are common. Fewer than half the children who start primary school make it through grade 5.[4] The worst dropout and repeat rates are in grade 1, where children face a challenging transition with little support. There is a culture of blame around these poorly functioning schools. Everyone feels the responsibility lies elsewhere. As a man in one of our research areas noted sarcastically: *"School? For teachers it's a place to show up from time to time to draw a salary; for parents it's a place to store children when they go to the fields, and for children it's a prison."*

The conflict added considerable pressure to an already bad situation. Education was disrupted countrywide[5]. Some schools were used as barracks by security forces; many were shut down completely; almost all were closed frequently because of bandhs or strikes called by the rebels. Even when schools were open, fears of violence and abduction kept many children and teachers away, and attendance was at an all time low.

Save the Children's primary school programs

Save the Children Norway (SCN) and Save the Children US (SCUS) have supported primary education in Nepal since the early 1990s. It has become clear over the years that no one intervention can change a system with multiple problems and weaknesses. SC has tried increasingly to provide an integrated package of supports with the goal of creating more accountable, child-centered environments and more involved communities. This research looks at the effectiveness of these programs in two districts: Siraha (supported by SCUS), and Kavre (supported by SCN).

[4] Ministry of Education and Sports, School Level Educational Statistics 2004(2061), Kathmandu, Nepal
[5] Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict (2005) Caught in the Middle: Mounting Violations against Children in Nepal's Armed Conflict, Watchlist, c/o Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, New York.

The programs include the following components :

- *Participatory school improvement plans:* All schools in Nepal are expected to to develop a school improvement plan - but generally it is a cursory exercise involving a few people. SC has encouraged an intensive process involving parents and children as well as teachers and school management committee members.
- *Strengthening the teaching staff:* Grade 1 teachers (and in Kavre others as well) get training in active teaching-learning methods, and follow-up support. SCUS provides an extra teacher in the more crowded schools, and in Kavre, "key" teachers are trained to visit other schools on a regular basis, helping other teachers sharpen their skills.
- *Early childhood development centers:* Community-based ECD centers, supported by SCN and SCUS, offer 4 and 5 year olds a mix of directed activities and opportunities for free play. The program includes a parenting education class, which encourages an awareness of the full range of children's needs. It takes time to establish strong centers, and they are not yet available to all preschool children in the program communities. In both districts, the centers are gradually handed over to the control of the district education office.
- *Support for school management committees:* In both districts, SC coordinates with the district education office to provide training and support for school management committee members. Information is provided on government policies, programs and subsidies, but also on the responsibility of members to promote a supportive environment for children's growth and learning.
- *Attention to children's health:* Siraha program schools have health program offering check-ups, deworming, vitamin A and referrals, as well as dealing with basic environmental health through construction of toilets and garbage pits. They also train one teacher in basic health and nutrition. Kavre schools have no formal health program, but pay close attention to sanitation and waste management.

Research objectives and methods

The study addressed the following questions:

- What are the circumstances, in and out of school, conflict-related and otherwise, that are stressful for children and undermine their well-being?
- What factors, policies, practices in the schools buffer children from these stressors?
- How effectively are parents and communities involved in these schools?
- How effective are these schools in encouraging children's attendance, retaining them from year to year, and ensuring successful learning?
- Do program school children show more evidence of resilience?
- What could school communities be doing better to provide a protective environment for children, to address their rights, and to promote their development as secure, confident people?

Information was collected from program schools (six in each district) and comparison schools (eight in Siraha, five in Kavre). These comparison schools, selected with help from the district education office, were in the same vicinity, in communities with very similar living conditions, socio-economic status and conflict-affectedness. The comparison schools had no program supports beyond those routinely provided to government schools.

Research tools were both qualitative and quantitative:

- Interviews and focus group discussions were undertaken with children, parents, teachers, school management committee members, also with SC and partner staff and with district education office personnel.
- An individual child tracking system recorded household demographic information, examination results, promotion, repetition, drop out or school completion for the cohort of children starting grade 1 in 2005.
- A psychosocial scale was used with a randomly selected sample of 2 boys and 2 girls from each grade in all Siraha research schools (n=280). This scale, originally developed by the SCUS home office, was adapted for use in Nepal, translated, back-translated, piloted and partially validated. There was too little time to use this scale in Kavre. This scale was in no way intended as a diagnostic screening tool to identify levels of distress in individual children. Rather, it was conceived as a way to compare the overall resilience or well being of different groups of children.
- A classroom observation tool was designed to assess classroom environment, teaching methods and style, and children's responses to the teacher, one another and their work.
- A standardized grade 1 test was developed so that children's learning, along with the quality of individual schools, could be more accurately assessed than is possible using school pass rates.

The research faced many obstacles. Hostilities often made trips to the field impossible. The research sites most likely to provide useful information on the effects of conflict were the most difficult to access. Schools were frequently closed while we were in the field. SCN was unable to start the Kavre research until late in the school year, and so could not manage all research components. Then nationwide turmoil in late April brought everything to a halt during some critical weeks at the end of our planned data collection period. By the time schools re-opened for the new school year, school staff could not spare the time to complete records, and final data collection was delayed by many months.

A basic research challenge was the caution and suspicion created by the hostilities. In this situation, familiarity became more important than past research experience. Comparison schools presented particular challenges, since there was no existing relationship of trust. The response was to make use of small research teams of two or three SC or partner staff

who were already known to as many of the target communities as possible. Especially in Siraha, where people were uneasy in groups, there was an emphasis on individual interviews. The use of program staff as researchers was a conscious choice not only because of their familiarity with the communities, but also out of a commitment to making research a vital part of the program, encouraging critical reflection and improvement.

The research districts

Siraha is in Nepal's terai, the agricultural flat land along the Indian border. The land is rich, but most people are poor, and the literacy rate is only 32 percent. The mixed population includes indigenous ethnic groups and people from the hills. Dalits, or untouchables, the poorest of the poor, make up almost 20 percent of the population. Most research schools are within 5 or 6 kilometers of the big east-west highway in Siraha, which exposes people to range of outside influences. Even the more distant schools are on busy side roads.

In Siraha, the land is rich but the people are poor

In Kavre, children walk to school through rugged terrain

Kavre is in the middle hills, not far from Kathmandu. Population is less dense than in Siraha, and literacy is higher (40 percent.) The research communities are quite isolated, and the closest road is often a few hours walk away. Here, children walk up to an hour in rugged terrain to get to school; in Siraha, no child is more than 20 minutes from school. But poverty is less extreme in Kavre. People are more likely to own their own land and animals, and to be self-sufficient. Researchers noted a greater sense of community in Kavre, and more openness to new ideas.

The impact of the conflict

Kavre was more intensely affected by the conflict than Siraha. For several years, the area was under de facto rebel control, and attacks by government security forces were common. Most people were used to the sound of bomb blasts, and many experienced cross fire during attacks.

There was considerable pressure from the rebels for social change in Kavre. Gambling and alcohol were strictly controlled. Other changes were also evident. Disputes which used to take years to settle in court were quickly resolved through the "people's courts", and teachers and health workers were under pressure to show up for work. Although the rebels brought a level of stability to the area, it was often accompanied by coercion and brutality.

In Siraha, the Maoists were a more shadowy presence, and few people at the beginning of the research year reported much direct impact on their lives Yet there was a good deal of fear, uncertainty and mistrust among residents, and thievery and extortion in the name of the Maoists was common. By the spring of 2006, the rebel presence had become more overt and even "official". The rebels had local offices and courts and paid staff, and in many schools, a Maoist representative kept an eye on things. This transition appeared to lessen rather than increase the general level of

anxiety among the respondents in this study. Since then, however, ethnic tensions have increased, and Siraha has become a place of serious unrest.

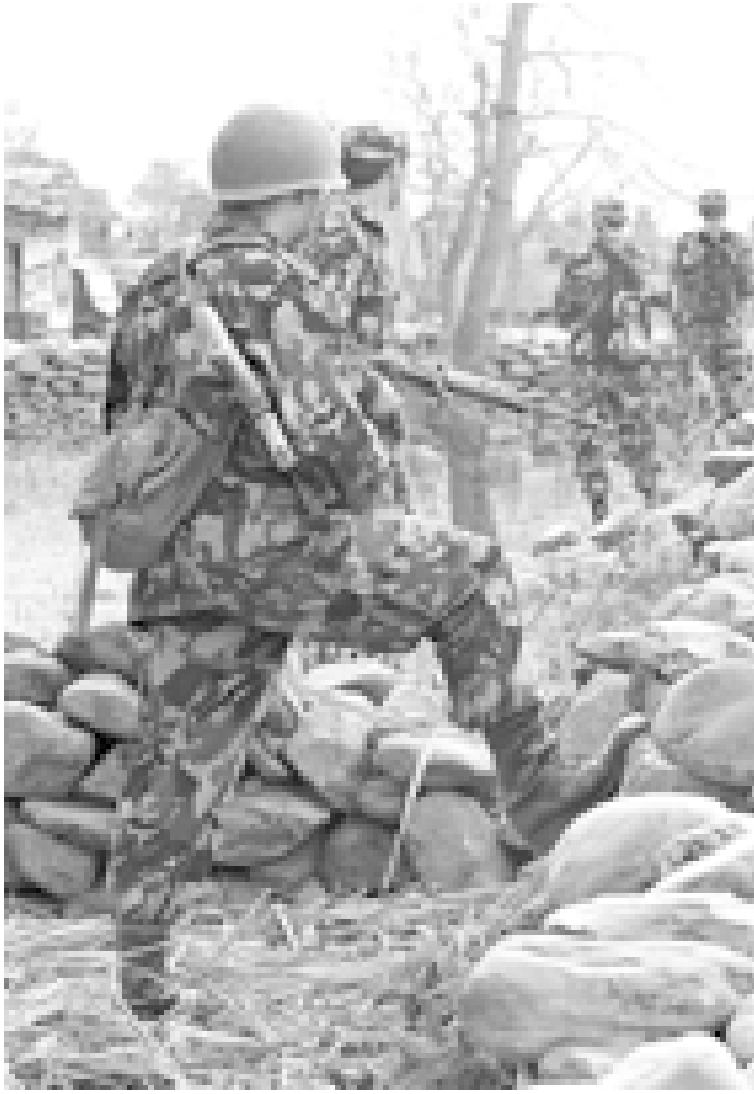
Although many children had been abducted in Kavre district, this had not happened in the research schools in either district, and most of the schools had not been directly affected by armed hostilities. But their operations were definitely affected, with the many strikes (bandhs) called by the Maoists resulting in a loss of up to a third of their scheduled days. Often parents were fearful of sending children for several days before and after a bandh. When schools defied the bandhs (a rare occurrence), they were generally visited by rebels and told to close. There was no apparent difference in the exposure of program and comparison schools to the conflict.

In Kavre, all teachers receiving a government salary paid a levy to the rebels, generally an amount equivalent to one day's pay each month. In Siraha, the practice was less routine, or perhaps just less acknowledged - one headmaster did not disclose payments until researchers said they had found this to be the general practice.

Violence in the name of the Maoists

There is a lot more trouble with the Khaubadi these days. We've heard about many thefts near our village and two rapes. These people come at night with knives and other weapons. We're much more afraid of them than of the Maoists. They seem to know about everyone's situation. They'll say "You sold your calf in the market today, so now you have to give that money to us." We heard that people in the next village went to police and complained, but we've heard nothing about any capture of those people.

Women in a Siraha village



soldiers look for landmines

Bandhs create fear

"During bandhs, we don't open the school, but I ride by on my bicycle to see what the situation is. I'm really fearful about what might happen, because I get letters from the Maoists saying that I have to close the school, and that if I don't I might lose my life. On bandh days my family are frightened for me and cry a lot, urging me not to go out. Everyone loves his life and his family. How can you work in that kind of environment?"

Headmaster, comparison school, Siraha

In Kavre, where so many villages were rebel strongholds, Maoists were a fairly regular presence within schools - more so, in fact, than district education office staff, who had not visited some schools in several years. It was not unusual for Maoists to "contribute" by teaching classes, and taking an active role in school management. Some schools, however, made it clear that rebels could only enter in regular clothes, without guns. In the local high school in Kavre, many students experienced political pressure from radical students in the Revolutionary Student Union (RSU), and this kind of pressure trickled down even to the primary level. According to one boy, a few students could have a lot of power. *"They say 'Anyone who is not RSU, put up your hand.' But no one dares to put up their hand."*

In Siraha, this kind of overt Maoist presence or pressure within the schools was rare when the research began, but later in the year, Maoists were regularly seen in the schools, made sure that teachers came on time, that parents sent their children regularly, and that classes were conducted properly. Neither teachers nor children appeared to find this intimidating. It was hard in many cases to know to whether this apparent acceptance came out of enthusiasm or resignation.

Stress, vulnerability and resilience

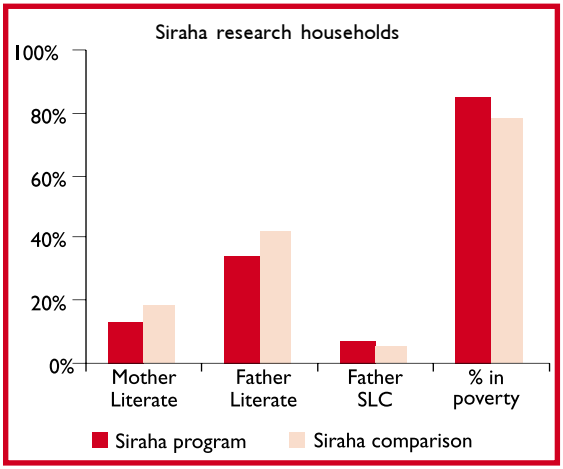
It is widely accepted that stress of various kinds can undermine children's development and well being in many ways, including their capacity to perform in school. Up to a point, facing challenges and hardship may encourage resilience and confidence in a child. But too much stress is harmful, and the likelihood of poor developmental outcomes increases cumulatively with the number of risk factors that are faced.[6] These risk factors must be considered in context, however. The outcomes for children are affected by many protective factors that can moderate the effects of challenging circumstances. Stable and supportive families, good friends and strong communities, for instance, can all help to buffer children from the risk factors in their lives.[7]

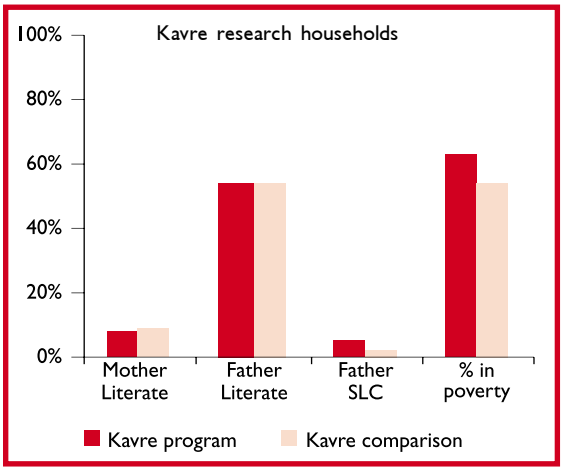
Children in Siraha and Kavre faced an array of stressful factors – not only the circumstances around the conflict, but also the pressures of severe poverty and a demanding environment, and in some cases, discrimination, abusive treatment and neglect. But despite strong similarities in the social and economic conditions of program and comparison communities and in their degree of conflict affectedness, children in the program schools appeared better able to cope with the challenges in their lives.

Most households face extreme poverty

[6] See Evans, Gary W and English, Kimberly (2002) The environment of poverty: multiple stresso exposure, psychophysiological stress, and socioemotional adjustment. Child Development 73 (4), 1238-1248. With regard to war-related stressors, see Berman, H (2001) Children and war: current understandaings and future directions, Public Health Nursing, 18 (4) 243-252.

[7] See for instance Werner, E E and Smith, R S (1992) Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.





Children's lives

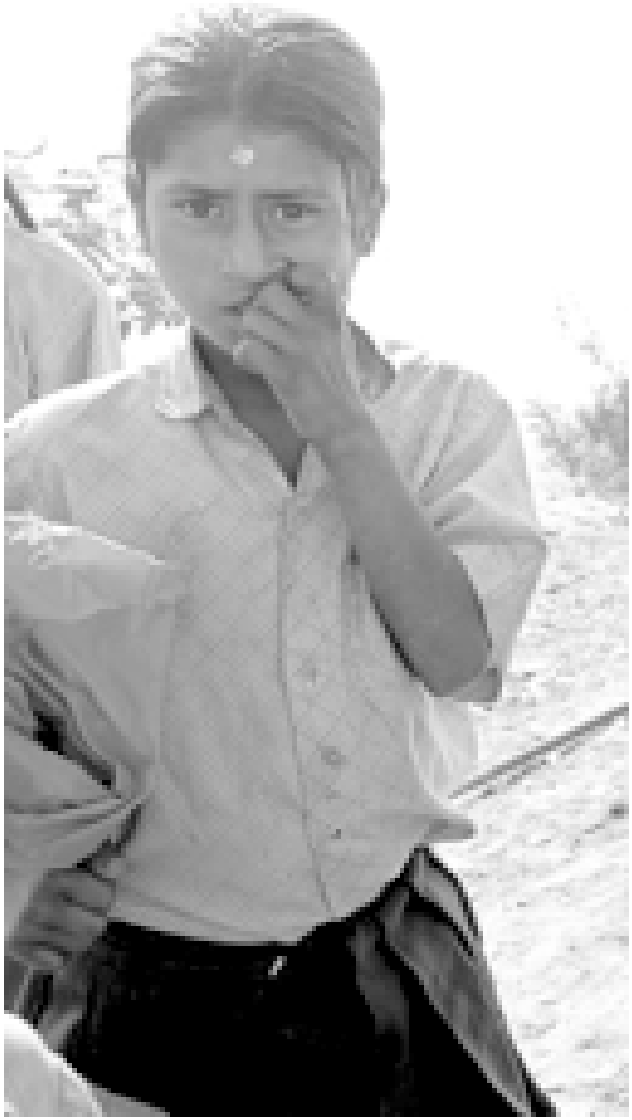
The great majority of children in these research schools faced extreme poverty. Demographic information from the households of all grade 1 children indicate that over 80 percent in Siraha and about 60 percent in Kavre lacked the resources to meet even basic needs. Levels of illiteracy were high, especially among mothers, and less than 5 percent of fathers had ever received a school leaving certificate (SLC). There was little difference between program and comparison households. These figures are markers for hunger, poor health, ignorance, limited prospects and multiple daily challenges, many of which devolve on children.

As might be expected, children reported that the conflict was a major factor in their lives, especially in Kavre, where they had all heard the sound of bomb blasts and seen family members caught between the demands of rebels and security forces. Although Siraha was less affected, even here children faced fears and worries. *"My father works in the police station in Lahan,"* said one boy. *"He says never to tell anyone his name, because the Maoists might harm him."* Most Siraha children were not directly exposed to violence, but all were frightened by accounts of abduction, by sporadic incidents in their vicinity, and by rumors and speculation at home or in the marketplace.

The conflict left many children with a feeling of resignation about their chances in the world. One boy said he wanted to be a driver when he was older. *"But what's the use? There are so many bandhs in Nepal, there's no way to be a driver anymore and have any work"*

Although the conflict loomed large for these children, for most of them other threats were of equal concern. Children in Kavre mentioned their fear of leopards as often as bomb blasts. Since the rebels confiscated all guns, the number of leopards had increased and they had become a threat to livestock and a source of fear for any child who had to tend goats. Some children said they were frightened of Maoists and army personnel, but just as many were frightened of ghosts and of the area's steep terrain, which can easily result in falls and injuries. Several children said they were scared of crowds, worried that their younger siblings might get lost. They were also frightened of crossing local rivers because of the very real danger of drowning.

For a number of Siraha children, what stood out were problems at home around alcohol abuse and domestic violence. In some of these communities, alcohol use was reported to be very high. The greatest source of fear for many children was not the Maoists, but their own drunken fathers and neighbors. *"People in my family don't treat each other well,"* said one grade 3 boy. *"My father beats my mother. I'm very frightened of him, and I always cry with my mother when she is beaten."* Children commented, too, on scarce resources being spent on alcohol rather than on food and school supplies, another common cause of anxiety.



All were frightened by accounts of abduction

Children worry about many things, including their younger siblings

Children share their fears

My father went off with another wife, and then I lived with my mother. But three months ago she had to leave for the Gulf to get work to support us. Now I'm alone with my grandparents, and I miss my mother a lot. I always feel frightened these days. When I walk to school and back, I'm afraid of explosions, especially when I pass a hill where a bomb exploded once. And when I get home, I think about my mother and feel very sad.

Kavre boy

I'm really afraid of thieves. My mother told me that they kill people with knives. That's why I sleep at night with my face covered. I'm also afraid of Maoists. They kill army people and also beat up thieves. But there aren't any Maoists around here, only in the hills. I'm not afraid of soldiers because they come to my school and play with us. But I would be very frightened if Maoists came to school because they take children away with them.

Siraha boy

I saw two Maoists killed by the road side, and there were police and army people all around. I was really frightened and told my mother. She said not to stay outside.

Siraha girl

When we go to the forest to graze the goats, sometimes we hear bomb blasts and we run home crying. My parents say not to go to such dangerous places. But I always have to graze the goats early in the morning, and sometimes it makes me late for school because I don't know what time it is. I get so scared when I'm with the goats and I hear leopards roaring. One time a leopard took two of my goats, so my father shouted at me and my mother beat me. But now if I say I don't want to go out with the goats, they say the leopard doesn't come to the same place twice, and I have to go.

Kavre girl

There are actually a lot of things that I'm worried about. I'm afraid of the big river that flows near our village. One of my friends drowned there while we were swimming. Another person was drowning once, but a Maoist saved him. I'm scared of drunkards, because they can get angry and hit you. And I'm really afraid when I hear the sound of bomb blasts nearby. I tell my mother when I'm frightened, because my father is not at home much. She tells me don't touch things that aren't familiar, don't go into the forest, stay away from the river. Whenever I hear any loud sound or hear sad news on the radio, I'm really worried, thinking this could also happen to us.

Kavre boy

I heard about the Maoists cutting off someone's leg. I've been too scared to leave my neighborhood.

Siraha girl

Some weeks ago after an attack near here, the Maoists had a lot of dead and injured people. They rounded up local people to carry them back home, and they said my mother and I had to help. I wasn't frightened because my mother was with me. But when we got there and I saw all the blood and heard people's cries, I was really scared.

Kavre boy

Children see and hear a lot – but most parents feel they are not affected

Adult perceptions of children's worries and fears

Adults in the research communities seemed surprisingly unaware of their children's anxiety and distress. Most adults admitted they were under conflict-related stress themselves – not only those who had been personally victimized, but those where the conflict was more distant, who were watching fearfully to see what would develop in their own communities.

Part of their concern was, of course, for their children. Parents worried about abductions and violence, and warned their children to avoid strangers. However, the great majority of parents, especially in Siraha, claimed that the situation was not actually affecting their children. Most teachers agreed. On the one hand, they argued that children were too young to understand what was going on. On the other hand, they said that because children were so exposed to news about the conflict and to people with guns, they were habituated to the situation and gave it no thought. Sometimes the same person would make both these claims without appearing to see the contradiction.

Most parents and teachers said they never talked to children about the situation, or about their worries in general. A number of parents said their children were sometimes sad or withdrawn, but that this was because of their desire for things like televisions and fans, or perhaps a sense that they had done something wrong. Most people felt that older children were probably under more stress than younger children, since they understood the danger of the situation more clearly.

This adult denial of children's anxiety may be related to the common tendency in Nepal to use fear as a strategy for dealing with children, both at home and in school. The most desirable traits for children in Nepal have traditionally

been obedience and respect.[8] Since fear and anxiety are so widely regarded as effective and acceptable means for promoting obedience and respect, it is probably not surprising that they are not seen as a cause for concern. They are more likely to be dismissed or overlooked as something quite routine.

It was only when the conflict was very close, or when children were actually present with adults at terrifying events, that adults seemed to become more aware of their fear, and to see it as equivalent to what they, as adults, were experiencing. Or perhaps they simply chose not to recognize children's fears except when they were impossible to ignore. Whatever the case, fears and worries were more openly discussed in the most seriously affected areas – in Kavre more than in Siraha, and generally more among people in Kavre who had been directly affected.

Adults in Siraha were more likely to acknowledge the impact of domestic violence on children, and a number of people, especially in the comparison communities, said this was a greater issue for children than the conflict. Many mothers spoke of children's fear around drunken and abusive fathers. In one community, a woman said that the problem was diminishing because of pressure and "punishment" by the Maoists, but this was the only such case reported in Siraha.

Children's fears are acknowledged in more extreme cases

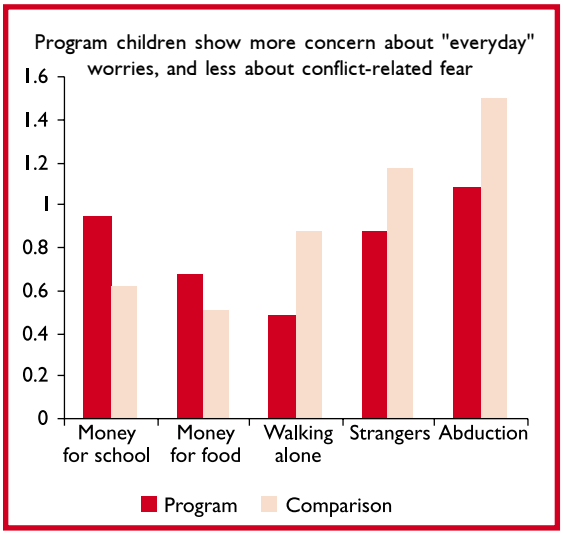
"The Maoists came to my house to ask me, in front of my children, to join the party. When I refused, they beat me up. My wife and children were crying and were afraid I'd be killed. The children finally got to sleep that night, but they are still afraid to do anything alone. If they see any unfamiliar face on the way to school, they just come back home. My younger child still won't speak outside of the house. I think it was because of this kind of worry that my daughter failed grade 7 this year."

Father, Kavre comparison school

[8] Arnold, C, S Bartlett, J Hill, C Khatiwada, P Sapkota (2000) Bringing up Children in a Changing World: Conversations with Parents in Nepal, Kathmandu: Save the Children Norway, US, UK and UNICEF,

The psychosocial scale

While children in program and comparison schools faced many of the same kinds of worries and challenges, the psychosocial scale implemented in Siraha provided some compelling evidence of the greater resilience of program children. The scale consists of 5 sections: perceptions of threat; perceptions of social support; confidence; overall satisfaction; and hope for the future. Each section contains between 5 and 18 questions, all answered on a scale of 0-3 (never, sometimes, often, always.) Cumulative scores for each section are also on this 0-3 scale. We were able to compare the perceptions and experience of 120 Siraha program children, grades 1 to 5, to that of 160 of their peers from the comparison schools. Program children, as a group, demonstrated a significantly lower perception of threat, and reported significantly higher levels of social support, confidence, satisfaction and hope about the future.



Experience of threats: The overall perception of threat was significantly lower ($P<.05$) for children from program schools. In all schools, children's most acute concerns involved abduction or the loss of family members. But aside from this similarity, program and comparison children showed a different profile of worry. Program children were less worried about things that could be related to the conflict. For instance, they were 39 percent less worried about being "taken away"; 70 percent less worried about "strangers"; 80 percent less worried about walking alone in their communities. They were relatively more concerned about more routine worries, like paying for school or food.

Although program families rated as marginally poorer than comparison families, it is unlikely that this meant a markedly more difficult situation with regard to food or school fees. Nor was there any evidence that comparison school communities faced higher levels of conflict-related threat. We hypothesize that what children worry about may be a better indication of their state of mind than the level of

worry they actually report. In other words, a child who is less worried about the presence of strangers and all that it implies may have more energy available to worry about paying for school. This assumption is supported by results from the rest of the scale, which point to a considerably higher level of well being in program children.

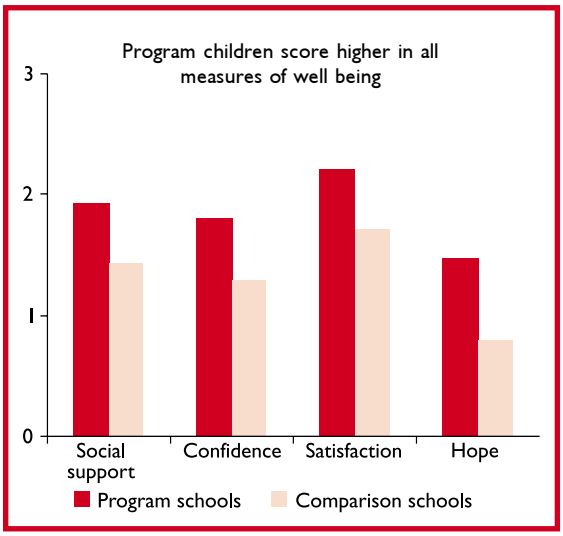
Unfortunately, in an effort to keep the scale as neutrally worded as possible, we did not ask specifically about alcohol use, domestic violence or physical punishment. It would have been very informative, in retrospect, to have been able to compare the experience of program and comparison children in these regards.

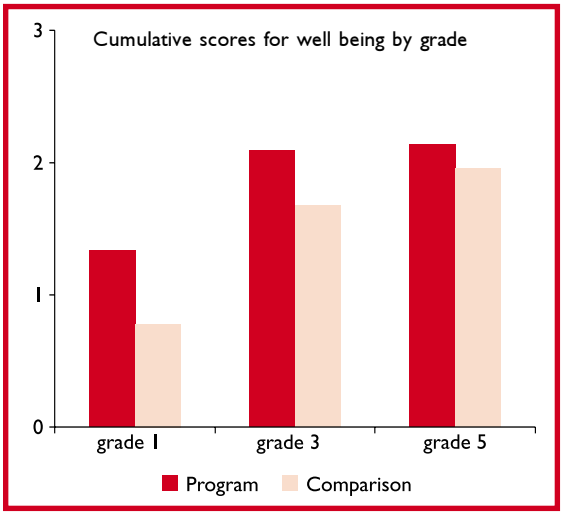
Children in program schools were more likely to feel that they had friends

Indications of resilience and well being: Program children scored distinctly and consistently higher on all questions in the well being sections - their average scores were 34 percent higher for perceptions of social support; 40 percent higher for confidence; 27 percent higher for satisfaction with life; and 87 percent higher for hope in the future. For all areas combined, program children scored 42 percent higher. All of these differences were highly significant (P<.001). Typical questions included the following:

- are there family members you can talk to if you are worried? (32 percent higher for program children);
- do you like the way your teacher treats you (48 percent higher)
- would your neighbors help you if you had a problem? (102 percent higher);
- do people think you're a helpful person? (139 percent higher);
- are you happy with your life? (22 percent higher);
- do you wish you were a different person? (44 percent higher)
- do you think your life will be better in the future? (82 percent higher).

There were no significant differences between boys and girls, children from different caste or ethnic groups, or those who had or had not been to ECD (as will be discussed in more detail.) But in both program and comparison schools, the higher their school grade, the higher children scored on the well-being sections. The difference between program and comparison children was greatest in grade 1 and had narrowed by grade 5.





Given that the primary focus of the program was on grade 1, this larger gap makes sense. But the question remains why younger children in all schools were so much more vulnerable. The general assumption among parents and teachers, as discussed above, was that younger children did not understand what was going on, and did not speak about it - therefore they must be anxiety-free. The results from the scale suggest the contrary – as do other sources of information.

When staff of both SC and partner NGOs explored their own memories of childhood, they recalled the age of five or six as a time of acute anxiety, fear and loneliness. The findings of the Nepal child rearing study affirmed these memories.[9] According to this study, toddlers in Nepal are treated with affection and tolerance, but this changes when they reach the age of four or five. Expectations become higher, and children are quite firmly controlled and repressed – often through fear, as discussed above. Starting school can add greatly to the stress.

Children are often unprepared, unsure what to expect and frightened of teachers. For the children in this sample, huge grade 1 classes compounded the anxiety. As these children grow older and begin to experience a greater sense of competence and control in their lives, the stress lets up. It is important to note that children who remain in school past grade 1 or 2, when dropout rates are especially high, are also likely to be the most capable and determined children, or those that are receiving the most support at home. This is especially true in the comparison schools, where fewer children stay on in school.

[9] Arnold, C, S Bartlett, J Hill, C Khatiwada, P Sapkota (2000) Bringing up Children in a Changing World: Conversations with Parents in Nepal, Kathmandu: Save the Children Norway, US, UK and UNICEF,

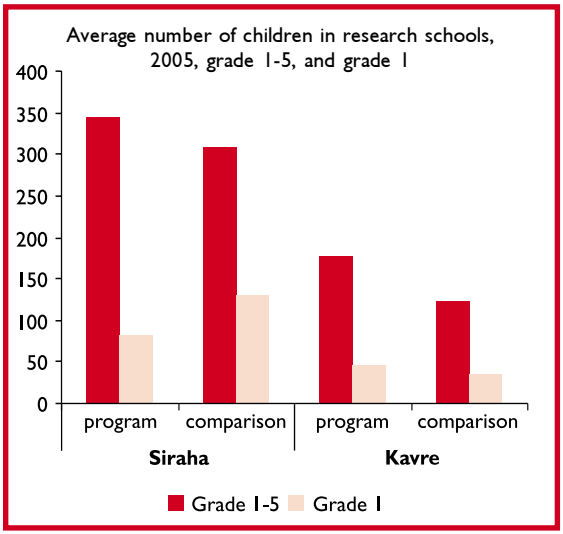
Starting school can add to the stress – children are often fearful and unprepared

The school programs

There are many ways that schools can affect the quality of children's daily experience, either adding to their distress or providing some relief. The program schools in Siraha and Kavre are far from perfect, but they were found to be generally warmer, more supportive places than the other schools, with higher levels of involvement and commitment on the part of parents and teachers.. As well as relieving some of the anxiety in children's lives, they encouraged better attendance, lower dropout rates, and higher school achievement - an important asset for these children. Here we will look at various aspects of the policies and practices in both program and comparison schools and consider their implications for children.

School enrollment

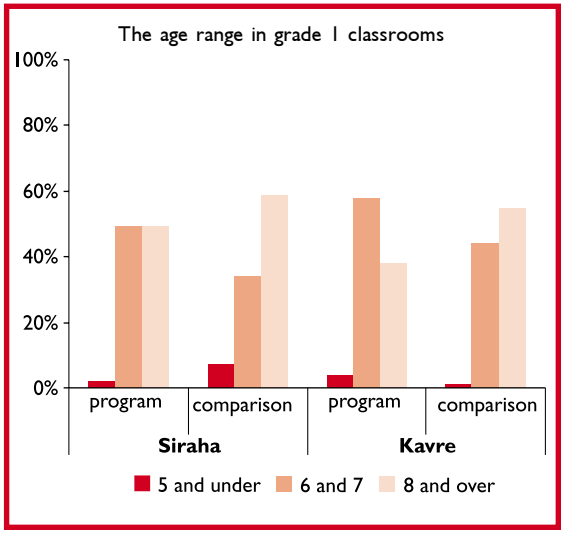
In 2005, there was a successful national primary school enrollment drive in Nepal. In thinly populated Kavre, this did not make much difference to the way schools functioned. But in Siraha, where schools were already overcrowded, it created a crisis. Grade 1 classes of well over 100 became the norm, and there were no resources for new classroom space or extra teachers. Teachers were faced with an impossible task,, and the transition to school became far more daunting for even the best prepared children.



Siraha's program schools were less seriously affected than the comparison schools, since they had been more gradually enrolling unreached children before 2005. So, although program schools were slightly larger on average than comparison schools (345 as compared to 310), they had smaller grade 1 classes (83 compared to 133). Kavre's program schools, on average, had less than half as many children as in Siraha, and comparison schools were still smaller. Boys

and girls were enrolled in roughly equal numbers in both program and comparison schools. But without knowing the number of children (mostly boys) attending private schools in these areas, it is impossible to tell whether or not girls were actually under-represented.

Age breakdown: More than half the grade 1 children in Siraha, and almost half in Kavre, were 8 years old or older. This was partly because of the many overage children enrolling for the first time, but also because of high failure rates in grade 1. Often a third of the class repeats the year. Program schools had fewer over-age children than comparison schools (27 percent less in Siraha, 31 percent less in Kavre). The number of underage children reported was surprisingly low, but schools and parents often fail to report the actual age of underage children. On the one hand, the presence of overage children is a healthy sign - it is important for these children to be in school. But the greater the age range in any class (and in some classes it was 6 or 7 years), the more challenging it is for teachers to provide a developmentally appropriate environment for everyone.



School management

Physical conditions in the schools

School conditions varied, but program schools were more likely to have enough classrooms, solidly constructed buildings, compound walls, arrangements for waste disposal, toilets and drinking water. But even in program schools, conditions were far from ideal. Siraha's overcrowding was the most serious concern. Grade 1 classes, in particular were so crowded that many children were forced to sit on the verandah where they could neither see nor hear the teacher. In Kavre, all program schools had enough space, although some comparison schools had too few rooms for all grades.

Grade 1 classrooms in the program schools were the most likely to be inviting spaces that might stimulate children's creativity, curiosity or desire for learning. Most classrooms were barren spaces with, at best, tables and benches, a blackboard, and a few posters Even in some program schools, materials supplied by SC were kept locked away in the headmaster's office.

In many crowded Siraha schools, children spill on to the verandah where they can neither see nor hear the teacher

All program schools had latrines, but maintenance was often a problem. In some cases, no water was made available for flushing or washing, and children continued to squat outdoors. One Kavre program school stood out for its efforts to improve awareness about sanitation. The headmaster himself took the lead in cleaning the toilets, and grade 1 toilets were right outside the classroom, where the teacher could keep an eye on children. Proper sanitation is an under-recognized component of protection for children in poverty, despite the fact that the links between sanitation and children's general health and development are well established.[10] There is a growing understanding of the link between toilets for girls and their continued enrollment in school. This is more of a concern in higher grades, when girls have started to menstruate, but even in primary school it is an important consideration.[11]

Where there was space for play, children made good use of it. But few schools had adequate equipment or facilities for recreation, and the grounds were seldom appealing. Children remarked on garbage, dirty standing water and the lack of vegetation. About half the Kavre schools, on steep hillsides, had no recreation space at all. Few schools in either district had shade trees; where they existed, children valued them highly as a pleasant place to socialize or study. It should be noted that research internationally has pointed to the stress reducing qualities of green environments, and their proven impact on children's functioning and social interaction.[12] It has also been noted that children worldwide tend to see dirty and unattractive surroundings as a humiliating confirmation of their own lack of self-worth.[13]

Where there was space for play, children made good use of it

[10] For an overview of these connections, see Bartlett, S (2003), Water, sanitation and urban children: the need to go beyond "improved" provision, Environment and Urbanization, 15 (2), 57-70.

[11] Doyle, B (1995), Increasing education and other opportunities for girls and women with water, sanitation and hygiene, Waterfront, UNICEF–NY special issue, August.

[12] Kaplan, S (1995), The restorative benefits of nature: toward an integrative framework, Journal of Environmental Psychology **15**: 169-182.: Moore, R C and H H Wong (1997), Natural Learning: The Life History of an Environmental Schoolyard. Berkeley, California, MIG Communications. Taylor, A. F., F. Kuo, et al. (2001), Coping with ADD: the surprising connection to green play settings. Environment and Behavior **33**(1): 54-77.

[13] Chawla, L, Ed (2001), Growing Up in an Urbanizing World. London, Earthscan/UNESCO.

School improvement plans

Although school improvement plans in Nepal are usually little more than an assessment of the construction and maintenance needs within a school, they can be far more than this. The planning process in the program schools was generally judged to have been a vital step in improving these schools, resulting in a shared recognition of problems, a sense of shared responsibility within the community, a higher level of involvement and expectation on the part of parents, and greater accountability. This kind of community process can be valuable in any situation, but in the context of conflict, when community interaction is frequently diminished and distorted by fear and mutual suspicion, there are particular benefits.

In Kavre, especially, the focus had moved away from repairs and construction to a greater interest in high-quality education and the capacity of the community to promote it. The school improvement plan in Kavre is annually updated, and although the process has usually involved only the school management committee and the teachers, parents and even children are welcome to offer their opinions about school issues. In one school, for instance, a suggestion box is available to all. The school opens it once a month and teachers discuss the contents.

In Siraha, the initial school improvement plan meetings were considered a great success, and generated a good deal of energy and enthusiasm for change. However, this tended to fade over time as less attention was given to maintaining these gains than to bringing new schools into the program. It is clear that a certain level of outside support is needed to maintain the initial enthusiasm. Another problem in Siraha was the increase in enrollment. While Kavre communities could afford to think about the quality of education and the social environment, Siraha communities were distracted by the concern for sufficient space and teachers. Despite the challenges in Siraha, however, the effects of the initial push for change can still be seen in the higher expectations and accountability in these schools.

School management committees

All schools in Nepal are expected to have an active school management committee (SMC), newly elected every two years. In many schools, this is a token committee of locally powerful men who take little active interest in the quality or management of their schools. In some Siraha schools, SMCs were taking their responsibilities very seriously – members visited the school, checked on teacher attendance, and monitored the proper use of funds. But some SMCs met rarely. Although they were aware of problems at their schools, most members, even in program schools, said they had "as yet" developed no practical response. Kavre program school SMCs tended on the whole to be the most aware, interested and actively involved.

In all communities, SMC members felt that most pressing issues they faced, aside from finances, were regular attendance for students and teachers, the Maoist strikes (*bandhs*), and, in Siraha, adequate classroom space. But few, except in Kavre program schools, appeared to give serious consideration to such child protection issues as physical punishment, discrimination or bullying. In most cases they said that they had no policies on these issues because these things were not actually problems.

All SMCs are required by law to include at least one woman and one *dalit* member. But even in program schools it was common for this requirement to be met through the appointment of one token *dalit* woman, who has little chance of influencing a committee of powerful high caste local men. In a few Siraha schools, both program and comparison, *dalit* members had started taking a greater role, and in Kavre, the majority ethnic Tamangs were also the majority on some SMCs. But in general, high caste men still dominated these committees.

Some SMCs took their responsibilities seriously

Our school has been much improved in physical terms, but we still have a long way to go in the education we provide. But the training we've had through this program has made everyone more aware of what a good education is. For the last few years our committee has seen to it that every child is provided with two school uniforms, so that they can always come to school wearing clean clothes. It's made such a difference, and there's been a change in children's social manner at the same time. A kind of friendly relationship has developed between the children and the teachers. I realize, you know, that our committee has no student representative. If we could arrange that, we'd understand their concerns better.

SMC member, Kavre program school

High caste men still dominate most school management committees

A corrupt head teacher makes change difficult

The roof of one of our buildings blew off in a storm last year, and classes have been doubled up since then. NGO funds were offered to provide half of the cost of reconstruction if the community came up with the rest. But no one came forward.. The headmaster has used money for his own purposes in the past – funding his daughter's dowry according to some – and now they worry that their contributions will also end up lining his pocket. I'm ashamed of the situation, but my efforts to improve the school have been completely undermined by this man..

SMC president, Siraha comparison school

Women members were clearly marginalized, unwilling to contribute their opinion. As one member noted, "A *woman may have many opinions but cannot raise her voice. Men naturally dominate, and those people who speak the loudest are the ones who make the decisions.*" Kavre women said they felt burdened by the SMC job. "*If there was another woman on the committee,*" said one woman, "*I would be much more regular and active. People don't think it's proper for one woman to meet with a number of men.*" A woman member in Siraha said the SMC made decisions, then sent someone to her house for her signature – she had been invited to only one meeting. Yet this woman and others like her are strong people in their own right. Although they don't speak their mind at meetings, they are likely to take the lead in such practicalities as persuading parents to send children to school. With more support and greater representation, women could make a real difference to the quality and range of activity undertaken by SMCs.

Head teachers

Active dedicated headmasters were found to be critical in achieving effective SMC leadership. When the head teacher was corrupt or unengaged, even a committed SMC had trouble making positive changes. This was far more often the case in comparison schools. Not all program schools had highly motivated, idealistic headmasters, but the added pressure provided by SC or the partner NGO made it much harder for headmasters to manipulate the situation for their own ends. They were more likely to find that working to improve their schools had its own rewards.

Other teachers can also take this critical leadership role. In Gautamnath, the best of the Kavre comparison schools, there used to be little involvement of any kind with parents, and many concerns about the use of school funds. The headmaster was always late to school and left early. When an unusual new teacher joined the school, he insisted on financial transparency. He visited homes, persuading parents to send their children regularly, and spent time every day before and after school working with children and

encouraging them do a good job on their work. The difference was obvious. Children's achievement at Gautamnath has been as good as the best program schools, and much of the credit must go to this man.

Parent involvement

It is widely accepted that a strong connection between parents and schools results not only in better schools, but in a better experience for children, both academically and in terms of their emotional well-being.[14] Informed parents who feel welcome at school are more likely to support children through the transition to school, ensure their attendance and demand accountability from teachers. It has also been argued that children's resilience is mediated by the capacity of their parents to cope effectively.[15] Involvement in the schools (and in ECD) provides parents, in the context of a difficult time, the opportunity to be active agents on their children's behalf.

In most comparison schools in Siraha and Kavre, parent involvement was limited.to concerns about scholarships and book distribution, and schools made little effort to change this. One headmaster said the cost of invitations and refreshments made it much too difficult to involve parents. Siraha program schools generally had a stronger parent presence, but even here some mothers said that only their husbands attended school meetings. In Kavre program schools, involvement was widespread. Women said they had become eager for involvement, and rushed to meetings when their children brought word from school – there was no need for written invitations. Parents cleaned water tanks,

Informed parents are more likely to ensure children's attendance and demand accountab ility from teachers

1 Sanders, M G and Epstein, J L (1998). School-family-community partnerships and educational change: International perspectives. In A Hargreaves, A Lieberman, M Fullan and D Hopkins (Eds), International handbook of educational change (pp.482-502). Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

2 Aisenberg, E and K Ell (2005) Contextualizing Community Violence and Its Effects: An Ecological Model of Parent-Child Interdependent Coping, Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Vol. 20 No. 7, 855-871

Sacrificing for children's education

"It's very important to me for my children to get an education. I tell them, 'Teach each other everything you know, work hard, and try to do well in school.' I never expect them to stay at home for the day to work, and I ask my wife to be sure to have food ready in time so they aren't late for school. Money is a problem. I sell my chickens to buy the children's notebooks, and I save extra money by just eating half meals. I took a loan from the teacher to pay for their school fees and uniforms. I often go to school to see how the children are doing. I told one of the teachers, "We are the parents who gave life to these children. But now you are the parents who must give them knowledge."

Father of three children in a Kavre program school

carried equipment from the roadway; and constructed good paths for children in this steep terrain, so they could easily get to school. Members of one SMC said parents were included in all decisions, and that every household contributed 17 days a year to maintenance. The more enthusiastic level of involvement in Kavre was related by one researcher to a difference in the social culture of the two districts. Kavre people, she said, appeared more interested in new ideas. In Siraha, people were cynical about things until their value was proven; they wanted to know what good it would do them.

Children's role

The active involvement of children in identifying and developing solutions to problems within the schools was comparatively rare. In Janajyoti school in Kavre, staff reported that each month children organized meetings that included teachers, SMC members and others to evaluate progress on such concerns as punishment, attendance problems, and lack of support from parents for their studies, and some other schools appeared to welcome children's input without having formal structures to encourage it. In Siraha schools, child rights committees were originally established to play this kind of role, but they had never been really active. In a number of program communities in both Kavre and Siraha, however, older children play an active role through their child clubs, often putting pressure on parents who are not getting their children to school, or on teachers who fail to show up regularly for work.

In general, however, it was clear that far more could have been done in this area within the schools.. Children's capacity as active and responsible agents is widely documented, as is the potential for such involvement to enhance children's confidence and capacity to cope in difficult situations. This was a missed opportunity.

Record keeping

While school record keeping may not seem central to child protection, reliable records are in fact a good indicator of strong and accountable school management. In Nepal, data on

attendance, enrollment, promotion and drop out tend to be incomplete, inaccurate, confusing, inconsistent, or simply not available. While many schools lack the capacity or the time to maintain proper records, others manipulate data intentionally to access larger support funds Few demands are made for accountability. The support made available by SC to program schools has resulted in far better record keeping in most cases. There are still problems with accuracy and consistency. But schools have come to recognize the advantages of clear records, and to appreciate the help they have had in maintaining them.

Books, supplies and scholarships

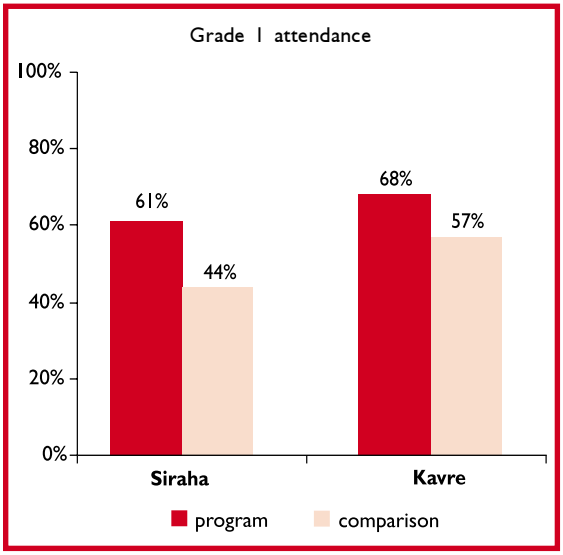
Pencils, school books, and small stipends of money for materials may seem like minor issues, but they are not perceived that way by Nepali families in poverty, and they can be the cause of considerable worry for both children and parents. One of the most common concerns voiced by children was the fear that they would have to leave school because their parents could no longer afford their supplies.

The district education office requires an updated list of students before it will hand over the funds for books. Schools are often slow to provide this list, and children often do not get books until well into the year. Where there are tensions between head teachers and parents or SMCs, a common accusation is that head teachers are pocketing the money. In Siraha, the unexpectedly high numbers of grade 1 children last year meant that books were in short supply. A father in one program school noted that his child still had no books halfway through the school year.

Dalit scholarships and stipends are another contentious issue, especially in Siraha. These small sums to cover the costs of uniforms and supplies are intended for all *dalit* students. But there are seldom enough funds to go around. Choices must then be made about which children receive the scholarships, and much ill feeling can result on all sides – among dalit families and between dalits and non-dalits. The impact of these tensions over small amounts of money should not be underestimated; it was a concern frequently raised by children.

Attendance and retention

Attendance was the single problem most frequently raised by teachers and SMC members, and researchers often found less than half the children were actually present in classes they visited. Low attendance offsets some of the pressures of overcrowding, but makes it difficult for teachers to support consistent learning, or to create solid relationships. While attendance for grade 1 (the class that was tracked) was poor in most schools, it was significantly worse in comparison schools than in program schools ($P<.001$). And despite the greater distances to school, Kavre children across the board, had better average attendance than those in Siraha.



A number of reasons were offered for poor attendance: pressure to help with younger siblings (especially for girls); cold weather; getting in the harvest; fear of punishment when homework had not been done (especially for boys). Actual attendance is worse than the figures indicate, since it is common for children go home for lunch and to come back late or not at all. Most teachers blamed poor attendance on parents, and claimed that nothing could be done.

The numerous Maoist bandhs have also had a serious effect on attendance, and fears of violence keep many children away from school. *"Before the blast in Narke, we used to have a lot of children at this school,"* said one teacher. *Since then, they've been afraid to come. They never come to school if they hear that the army is around."*

Despite the challenges, many program schools have managed to improve attendance. When the program first began in Kavre, parents thought that a child who came to school four or five days a month was a "regular" attender. Since then, the understanding of regularity has changed considerably, as local neighborhood education committees play an active role in monitoring the attendance of both teachers and students.

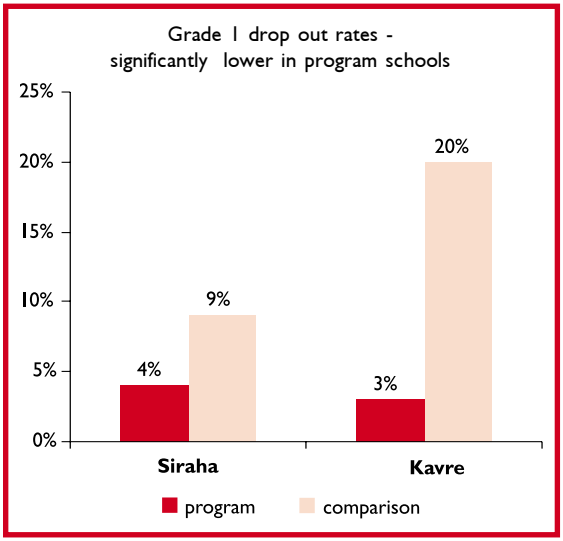
Some effective strategies for improving attendance in program schools have included: attendance sheets on the wall which students sign when they arrive; the use of "leave applications" which students must file if they plan to be away; child-run attendance committees that demand "fines" from truants – like running around the school grounds, dancing or singing in front of the class. One school started a "day boarding" option; the school stays open from 6 am to 6 pm and for a small fee, children can get lunch at school and support from teachers while doing their homework. In some cases, community people or child club members have taken matters into their own hands. Some mothers in a Kavre village, for instance, regularly rounded up children on the paths around the village and saw to it that they moved on to school. A

"Now we just do the work instead"

These days, most children in our village are in school, and they go regularly. Of course, there was some resistance to that for a while. People depended on their children to help get all the work done. But it's interesting – we still have the same number of acres under cultivation, the same number of buffalo to tend. But somehow the work still gets done even with all the children in school. I think we used to spend a lot of time scolding children to get their chores done. Now we just do the work instead.

Father of four older children, Kavre program school community

A number of reasons were offered for poor attendance



factor that seemed to have some impact on attendance was the quality of the school grounds. Parents at one Siraha school noted that children headed back to school after lunch because it was the best place to play in their congested village; and researchers observed that in schools with nice shade trees, children liked to sit outside doing their homework..

Attendance was a serious problem with teachers as well as children. Many arrived late, or failed to show up for days at a time, further discouraging children's attendance. This is discussed in more detail below.

Day-to-day attendance is critical – but so is children's retention in school from year to year. Nepal has extremely high drop out rates – only 50 percent of the children who start school currently complete grade 5.[16] Traditionally, the highest drop out rates have been in grade 1, with all its difficult transition challenges. The program schools have made a considerable difference in this regard. Drop out rates for Siraha's program school grade 1 children are less than half of those in comparison schools; and in Kavre, only 15 percent – in both cases a highly significant difference. Retaining children in school from year to year is a critical component of protection – safeguarding them from early entry into work or from induction into rebel forces, and ensuring them a better future.

[16] Ministry of Education, *Nepal in Educational Figures 2005*, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Discrimination

Program schools in general were considered to be doing a better job of protecting minority children and girls from discrimination, and a number of people remarked on the more enlightened attitudes since the program had been established. Teachers, SMC members and even most parents claimed discrimination was not an issue in their schools, and that everyone was treated alike. No schools had explicit policies regarding discrimination – they said such policies were unnecessary.

Beneath this generally higher level of awareness, however, many subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination persisted in some program schools and communities. For instance, girls were more frequently kept home from school to help with household chores. This was not viewed as discriminatory, but as a clear necessity :*"If they go to school, their mothers can't go to work, and the family goes hungry."* No one suggested, however, that boys could be kept home instead. The marginalized position of the female SMC members was also seldom raised as a concern, even in the program communities..

In the same way, few teachers felt that "good natured" teasing was discriminatory. Yet children made it clear that this could be painful. A Magar child said that when she did not complete her homework, the teacher jokingly said *"Magar homework nagar!"* (Magars don't do their homework) and all the children laughed at her. A *dalit* child described being teased by the teacher about her caste; when she complained, no action was taken, and her grandmother advised her just to forget it. She said she felt very bad and cried a lot that day. When teachers were questioned about this kind of thing, they insisted that there was no discriminatory intent. This is probably true. The issue is usually less about intent than about awareness. Few people think of themselves as bigoted or biased. They believe their practices and beliefs are just "normal." It can take more than a few days of awareness raising to change fundamental mind-sets.

One school which has put serious effort into dealing with entrenched attitudes is Janajyoti in Kavre (where the head teacher was cleaning the toilets when the research team arrived.) In this school, maintenance jobs were given to children in all classes on a rotating basis. Parents were initially angry because they considered this the responsibility of a low-caste peon. But slowly it has become more accepted.

Discipline and physical punishment

Beatings and humiliation are a fact of life in most Nepali classrooms. As with discriminatory practices, few teachers consider themselves to be abusive. But in most of the schools, even some program schools, teachers routinely entered the classroom with a stick in hand. Most claimed that the stick was essential to maintain order, especially in large classes. They felt

that physical discipline was expected by students and parents, and was a sign that teachers were doing their job. A few individuals felt that beating children was a bad idea, but not strongly enough to deal with the issue. One comparison school headmaster, for instance, said he thought corporal punishment undermined healthy development and good relations between teachers and children – but admitted that most of his teachers beat children, and that he took no steps to prevent it.

In program schools, the level of awareness was generally higher, and many had informal policies against the use of physical punishment. But according to students, teachers still pulled their ears or hair, and cuffed them when they failed to do their homework or fell asleep in class. This was less common in Kavre, where, according to informants, there is less of a tradition of beating children. People in the *terai*, where Siraha is located, were considered by researchers and staff (mostly non-terai people) to be more explosive. *"This is an environment where people shout,"* said one staff member. *"You might think they are fighting sometimes, but actually they are just having a discussion. Their feeling is that, unless they are a bit aggressive, children won't listen. They have to create fear to have a disciplined class."*

"I encourage them to forget their feelings"

"Oh no, I never beat children, because I think it's important that they have a friendly atmosphere to learn in. Actually, sometimes I DO beat children, but only if they are disobedient or forget to do their homework. But then I encourage them just to forget their feelings about being punished."

Head teacher, Kavre comparison school

But even in Kavre, physical punishment was not unusual. Children said they were beaten at times, but never in program school grade 1 classes, which have been the major focus of the program. Discipline in the program schools was more likely to take the form of ear pulling or slaps rather than beatings.

Some children agreed with adults that they were punished because they needed to be, and they appeared not to take it too seriously. *"Yes, it happens,"* said one boy. *"But it happens for our own good. After a few minutes, our teachers still love us."* Did he find it humiliating? *"Not really. We know that next day, it will be our friends' turn."* But most children found the practice shameful and upsetting. The way they experienced it

depended a good deal on the intent of the teacher. There was clearly a difference for children between a generally kind, caring teacher who occasionally pulled hair or cuffed heads, and one whose intention was to frighten and humiliate children. But as long as physical punishment remains an accepted practice, there is little chance of controlling the sadists, or eliminating the more harmful abuses.

Most children find physical punishment shameful and upsetting

Teaching and learning

A decent education is a vital component of children's protection. Basic academic skills safeguard children's future opportunities in a context where these are being systematically undermined. The quality and style of teaching is crucial – not only for children's confidence and enthusiasm.about school, but for their capacity to develop important critical thinking skills.

Improvements in program schools

SC has contributed in various ways to the quality of the learning environment through training for teachers in active, child-centred methods, appropriate materials, and the provision of extra staff where necessary. The program schools have also introduced the concept of "grade teaching", at least in grade 1. For younger children especially, having just one teacher can result in a closer relationship, and allows for a more integrated approach to teaching and learning.

Most program teachers found their training useful – they felt better able to group children by ability and to use materials effectively, and, importantly, more aware of the needs of particular children. On the whole, program schools (grade 1 in particular) were found to be quite different from their counterparts – both teachers and children were more engaged, and the atmosphere was more relaxed, friendly and stimulating. Even with older children, teachers in the program schools were warmer and more likely to take an encouraging, kindly interest in children. But the program did not always result in improved teaching methods or better awareness of students.

In program schools the atmnosphere was more relaxed and friendly

Continued challenges

In some schools, researchers saw no activity-based teaching at all, and found dust covered teaching materials piled up unused in the office. Despite many trainings, teachers in one school said they still believed in traditional teaching practices and felt there was no point trying to change them – or to do anything about poor attendance or homework because these things were unlikely ever to improve.

In some Siraha classes, these attitudes were almost understandable. Even for committed teachers, willing to try new approaches, dealing with 80 or 100 children presents an overwhelming challenge. The teacher's job becomes primarily one of management. Most of the largest classes had been split into two sections – but often just one teacher went back and forth between classrooms. "*It's very difficult to teach them anything,*" said one teacher. "*But at least they're learning to be with each other, to sit still and to listen.*" Many demoralized teachers retreated back to their more familiar rote teaching practices. SCUS decided no longer to offer the active teaching-learning training where classes were larger than 60 children. Unfortunately, the obvious alternatives – more teachers, more classroom space – were beyond the means of the program., and there has been little effort to explore less costly solutions – such as training volunteer aides.

In a crowded class, the teacher's job becomes primarily one of management

A disenchanted official speaks openly

I've been in the education sector for 30 years now, and I've worked in the district education office for the last five. There are a lot of things that cause me serious concern about the hiring and promotion of teachers. There are criteria certainly, but they are not followed. Hiring has more to do with nepotism and bribery than with qualifications or skills. Lower caste applications often just get thrown out. People at the community level have no input at all into decisions about the teachers that get placed in their schools. I know of a temporary teacher who got the highest marks in the qualifying test, but still wasn't given permanent status. There's an evaluation system for permanent teachers, but it's a joke. It has nothing to do with performance. Teachers who never even show up can get a good evaluation. Education officials "supervize" teachers without ever even going to the schools. There are some really excellent committed teachers out there, but they get so frustrated when they see the cheats get promoted. I'm ready to resign, so I'm not afraid of speaking my mind.

District education official, Kavre

A major challenge for the program has been simply to encourage in teachers a sense of responsibility to their students. Nepal's system does not promote this. Job security has more to do with teachers' relationship with their superiors than with the quality of their teaching or their regular attendance. Many teachers are known to spend as much time at the district education office, ingratiating themselves, as at school teaching. It is not uncommon for teachers to run private schools on the side, showing up only occasionally for their paid job. Given these realities, it is surprising that the program has accomplished as much as it has in terms of changing attitudes and accountability.

Language

Most people in the research areas are not native Nepali speakers. Yet the school curriculum is in Nepali, presenting real transition problems for children – both in terms of school achievement and their sense of confidence and comfort at school. There is no systematic approach to this issue. In Siraha, most people speak Maithili, a language closely related to Nepali. Many teachers conducted classes in Maithili, and little effort was made to improve the language skills of either children or teachers. In Kavre, most people speak Tamang, which is quite different from Nepali. As a result, there was more awareness of the language issue,and more effort had to be made to deal with it. This showed up in the standardized Nepali test, where Kavre's grade 1 children scored considerably better than the children in the Siraha sample. However, this was not a simple matter even in Kavre. In one Kavre program school, for instance, there was a rule that only Nepali be spoken on the school premises. But children just stopped speaking, and finally the rule was withdrawn. This issue could use more investigation and support, since it is apparent that is closely tied to the level of stress experienced by young children (see below).

Parents' perceptions of school quality

Program parents, on the whole, had far more complaints about schools and teachers than comparison parents – but this was clearly because of their much higher expectations. When comparison parents complained, it was about gross abuses – like teachers who never showed up. When program parents complained, it was more often because a teacher failed to check homework carefully enough. Parents from program schools, across the board, showed far more interest in what their children were learning, were more inclined to discuss school with their children, and to encourage their achievement.

In Siraha, program parents were especially concerned by the way school quality had gone down as enrollment went up. "*When the school was less crowded,*" said one dalit mother, "*the teachers valued our children more. Now they don't take care of them as well. They feel their responsibility is to pass children to the next class, not really to teach them. We don't know how to read and write, so the teachers think we don't understand that our children are learning nothing.*" But parents also acknowledged that teachers were now more regular, used more interesting teaching methods, and made extra curricular activities available. Kavre parents on the whole seemed more satisfied with their schools and teachers, and were more inclined to blame their children for low achievement. A number of parents described their frustration with children who wouldn't study hard enough (see box).

A good measure of parents' assessment of school quality is the decision that they make about where to send their children. Especially in Siraha, a growing number of private schools offer an alternative, and families in a number of comparison schools were transferring their grade 1 children after a few months. By contrast, most of the program schools have been highly sought after. In one village a private school had to shut down because all the children moved to the nearby program school – sometimes because parents disliked the degree of pressure at private schools (see box). In another

"When the school was less crowded, teachers valued our children more"

A frustrated father

"My children are just not that good at school. I shout at my daughter and try to make her understand about the importance of education, but she doesn't like to study. All she wants to do is play and listen to the radio. My son is also frustrating. I sent him to a private school for a while, but now the Maoists closed it and he is back here. He doesn't want to study either. He just likes to tinker with machinery. So far he has broken three cassette players. I've provided everything for these children. If they don't understand that education is important, what can I do? I don't think it's the fault of the teachers, because some children are doing very well."

Dharma Sing Tamang – Kavre father and president of program school PTA

Program schools are better than private schools

"I believe this school provides a better education than the private boarding school. My eldest daughter goes to the boarding school but the other two attend this school. I would prefer to have them all here, but my relatives own the boarding school and asked that I send at least one of my children. The teachers here do their best to provide a quality education – they are present for classes, they check children's homework frequently, and conduct various extra curricular activities. Of course, all of this also happens in the private school, but with much more pressure. My daughter is under pressure all the time. Sometimes she talks in her sleep about finishing her homework. I don't think this is good for a child her age – schooling should be more enjoyable. My younger daughter actually has more confidence and really enjoys school."

Father of three, Siraha program school

program school, so many children from further away were trying to attend that they had to limit enrollment to children from the immediate vicinity.

Children's opinions about teachers and teaching

Children at the program schools tended to like their schools and teachers, and to be understanding about the challenges they faced. Where teachers were using more creative and engaging teaching methods, children described these with enthusiasm. But most children made it clear how hungry they were for a better education, and offered a clear analysis of the problems.

Children were enthusiastic about more engaging teaching methods

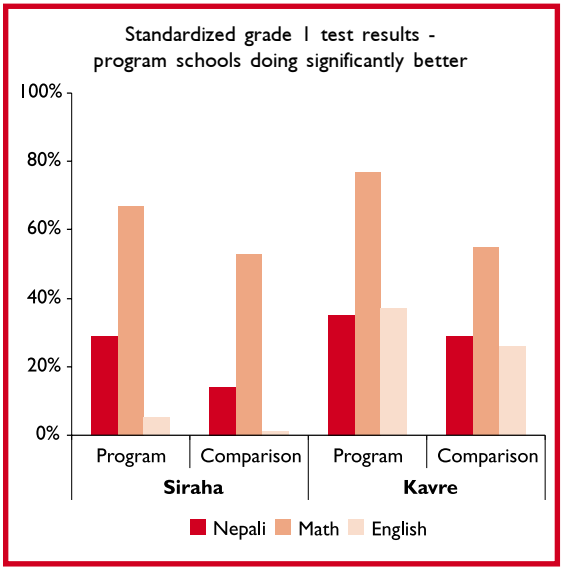
Many children were critical of physical punishment as a tool for classroom management: *"Sometimes the teachers punish us if we don't do our homework right,"* said some 4th and 5th grade girls in Kavre. *"We think that instead of hitting us they should teach us properly."* Some questioned the commitment of teachers: *"Our teachers don't teach us very regularly"* said a 5th grade boy in a Siraha school. *"One teacher takes care of two classes at a time. He gives us homework to do, but when we bring it to him, he never checks it. He just says, 'Everything is fine. Off you go.' I don't like that. It makes us feel bad when the teachers don't check our work. How can we learn if we don't know what our mistakes are?"* Some children felt teachers should simply be better at teaching: *"If the teachers would learn some new ideas and tools, their teaching might be more interesting,"* said a 5th grade boy from Kavre. *"Most students don't even understand what the teacher is saying,"* said a girl from Siraha.

Many children were frustrated by how hard it was to get an education: *"We're very weak in English and math,"* said some 3rd and 4th graders in a Kavre school. *"We're worried that if school is always closed for bandhs, we're going to fail our exams."* Some children welcomed these days off as time for play, but many more recognized it as a problem. *"I just wish my school could be regular,"* said a 4th grade boy from Kavre. *"Then I could learn more and that would help me a lot in my future. But my education has been scattered into pieces by all these bandhs."*

What are children actually learning? Results of the standardized grade 1 test

The standardized grade 1 test provided a fair comparison of the performance of grade 1 children in program and comparison schools. The test covered only the most basic skills and material covered by the grade 1 curriculum, and children should in theory have been able to score close to full marks. All teachers agreed that this material should be familiar to the children, and every opportunity was given for children to demonstrate their best performance. But results were discouraging. Most grade 1 children were simply not acquiring basic grade 1 skills, especially in language. Many showed evidence of only the most rote learning, with little or no capacity to apply this learning. Many children could recite the alphabet, for instance, but did not know what sound any letters represented. They could recognize a plus sign, but did not know what it meant. A handful of very capable children rose well above the general level. But many children were learning very little, and few schools were successfully providing a basic grade 1 education.

Program children, however, were doing significantly better than comparison school children in all subjects ($P<05$), and the difference was highly significant for some subjects ($P<.001$ for Nepali in Siraha, for Math in Kavre). Kavre children were also doing significantly better than Siraha children ($P<.05$) – a reflection in part of the difference in class sizes – and



almost all children did much better in Math than in Nepali or English (in Siraha many scored no points at all in their English test).

While the program was making a significant difference for non-dalit children in Siraha, the difference did not reach significance for dalit children. Results from an earlier study in many of these same schools had shown that these children thrived in a warm supportive setting and had significantly higher pass rates than dalit children in non-program schools.[17] It seems likely that the rapid increase in class size in Siraha meant that program school teachers were no longer able to give deprived dalit children the extra support they needed – a clear indication of the eroding quality of the program. By contrast, in Kavre, the greatest impact of the program was for the lower achieving Tamang children.

There was a good deal of variation even among program schools. A comparison of the best and worst achieving program schools in Kavre pointed to a number of critical factors: the level of parent and community involvement; the mix of ethnic and caste groups (allowing a greater exposure to Nepali for non-Nepali groups); the level of environmental health within the community; and the relative number of ECD children.

Correlation with the results of the psychosocial scale: Fifty-six grade 1 children in Siraha underwent both the psychosocial scale and the standardized grade 1 test – a small sample, but large enough to indicate that those children who demonstrated strong psychosocial well being were also those who were doing well academically. Significant correlations ($P<.05$) were found especially between children's Nepali scores and their overall well-being.

[17] Bartlett S, U Pradhananga, P Sapkota and N Thapa (2004) *Everyone Counts: Dalit Children and Education*, Save the Children US, Kathmandu.

In other words, there were strong connections between children's language skills and their psychosocial well being – a link which has certainly been made by others, and which this research helps to confirm.[18] We cannot make claims about cause and effect. More confident children may try harder in school, and be more outgoing in picking up language skills. But better language skills may also cause children to be more confident and hopeful. Either way, this relationship highlights the challenge involved for children starting school when they must face a new language with no preparation and little support. Based on their average Nepali scores (27 percent) at the end of the year, compared to average Math scores (63 percent), it is clear these children were struggling. This is an academic issue, but it runs deeper than that. Not being able to manage in Nepali affects all aspects of life in school – not just what happens in one academic subject area. We can safely assume that struggling with a new language adds considerably to the level of stress that children experience. This is an issue within Nepal's school system that deserves far more attention.

The role of ECD

Qualitative findings from both districts, in keeping with our own earlier research,[19] pointed to distinct differences between grade 1 children who had attended ECD and those who had not. Parents and teachers spoke of their enthusiasm, friendliness, confidence and readiness to cope with the challenges of school. There were some reservations, however. One Kavre headmaster felt the performance of ECD children was not as high as he would have expected, and SC staff members in both districts were concerned that the quality of the ECD program was deteriorating. In Kavre this was attributed to the less adequate support provided by the district education office as it took centers over. In Siraha, staff felt it was related to the overly rapid expansion of the program: "*You can't endlessly increase the scale of a program without increasing the support structure that goes with it. We have almost doubled in two years with no increase in our capacity for support.*"

These reservations were supported by the results of both the psychosocial scale and the standardized test. Neither one showed a significant difference between individual ECD and non-ECD children. A few factors, in addition to the erosion of quality noted by staff, may together provide some additional insight into these results:

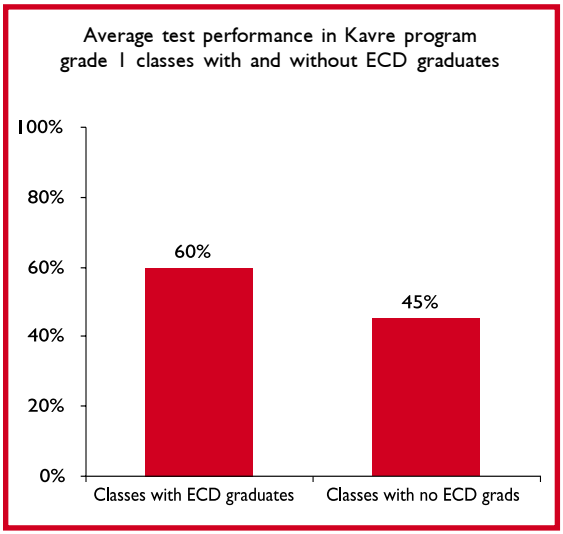
- In Siraha, the overcrowding must certainly have had an effect. The psychosocial scale was administered not long after the start of the school year. These children had just

[18] Cohen, N (2005) The Impact of Language Development on the Psychosocial and Emotional Development of Young Children. Encyclopaedia on Early Childhood Development , 2002:1-7

[19] Save the Children US (2003) What's the Difference? The Impact of Early Childhood Development Programs: A Study of the Effects for Children, their Families and Communities, Kathmandu

recently moved from groups of 15 to 25, with a focus on play and active learning, to classes of 70 to 100 with no individual attention. Their confidence and sense of social support could well have plummeted rapidly under these circumstances. In terms of our capacity to confirm this hypothesis, it is particularly unfortunate that the psychosocial scale could not be implemented in Kavre, where the smaller and more child-centred classes could well have resulted in a different outcome.

- Siraha's overcrowding would also have made it very difficult for teachers to build on ECD gains. Rather than continuing the focus on activity based learning, many of these children would have had to make a transition to purely rote learning. This could have been confusing and discouraging, undermining their curiosity and interest in learning over the course of the year..
- In Kavre, a different dynamic may have been at work. The child-centred ECD-like atmosphere and teaching methods in the smaller grade 1 program classes could, by the end of the year, have minimized differences in achievement between ECD and non-ECD graduates.
- Also, the Kavre ECD sample for the standardized test was very small, reflecting the relatively smaller number of ECD children in Kavre. These children performed better than their peers, but sample size may have prevented this difference from reaching significance.



In terms of ECD and academic achievement, there is another side to the picture. In both Kavre and Siraha, grade 1 classrooms with a greater number of ECD graduates showed clearly higher average performance than other classes, despite the lack of difference found between individual children. This suggests that ECD was raising the general standard of expectation and performance – and that "a rising tide raises all boats." Qualitative evidence certainly pointed to the fact that friendly, confident ECD children who had no fear of teachers became reassuring role models for their less experienced peers. However, this issue calls for more investigation, and a far better understanding of the dynamics of the transition experience for grade 1 children. In Kavre, it was especially easy to see this difference, because not all program school grade 1s had ECD graduates.

A web of supports

Despite the need for improvement in many of the program schools, and despite the general obtuseness among adults about the extent of their children's anxieties, the program schools and communities clearly provided a warmer, more secure, supportive environment for children than the comparison schools. While we cannot quantify the relative effect of these factors, we can look at them as a web of related supports for children.

- Teachers who have been through training in active teaching-learning are generally warmer and more sensitive to children. This training may not have profound effects for all teachers, but all are at least exposed to the idea that it is appropriate to respond to young children with kindness and understanding. In the case of basically kind-hearted teachers, it takes little persuasion for them to accept that they do not need to be stern disciplinarians to be good teachers. Even where teachers continue to pull ears and hair, they are less likely to beat children, and children do not feel the same level of fear.
- The presence of ECD graduates in grade 1 is likely to make the transition to school less stressful for those children who lack this experience.
- Siraha program schools have smaller grade 1 classes than comparison schools because their consistent support for enrollment over the years meant they were not as heavily affected by the enrollment drive. These smaller classes, along with grade teaching, mean that teachers are more likely to know children and to respond to them, and that children are more likely to feel a sense of support. School is a less frightening place for a new child if the teacher knows her name, and if there is a place for her to sit each day.
- Program school children more often have parents who encourage regular attendance. Predictability and structure are important sources of security for all children, especially for those living in chaotic, unpredictable circumstances. It also puts less stress on children if they do not have to

Confidence and achievement go hand-in-hand in program schools

choose between the demands of school and the demands of parents for work. When parents are involved in schools as partners, everyone benefits.

- Better teaching in these schools has resulted in higher achievement for children. Children who feel more confident about their abilities and achievements are more likely to feel a sense of control in their lives and less likely to be vulnerable to stress and anxiety.
- Some of these schools have taken measures to give children a more active role in school management and decision-making – another way to ensure that children grow in confidence and in their sense of control.
- The program schools are more likely to have the funds to ensure that children have the notebooks and supplies they need. This eliminates a source of stress for many children.
- In Kavre, where the trip to school was stressful both because of the threat of bomb blasts, but also because of the difficult terrain, efforts to create better paths and even to have a parent presence along the way relieved anxiety for many young children.
- Clean toilets and proper waste collection protect children's health, but also contribute to a more aesthetically pleasing environment. This may feel like a small point, but research from around the world indicates how sensitive children are to garbage, smells and unpleasant surroundings, and what an important role an appealing environment can have in reducing their stress and discomfort.[20]

[20] Chawla, L, Ed (2001). Growing Up in an Urbanizing World. London, Earthscan/UNESCO; Wells, N M (2000). "At home with nature: effects of "greenness" on children's cognitive functioning." Environment and Behavior 32 (6): 775-795

Conclusions and Recommendations

Save the Children's program schools are, without question, doing a better job protecting and providing for children than other schools in their areas. There are weaker and stronger program schools, but even the weakest program schools are better than most of the comparison schools.

The program schools have more committed teachers and school management committees, their parents are more aware and involved, the school grounds are in better shape, and there are more likely to be active initiatives in place to address the numerous problems that confront Nepal's schools. In overcrowded Siraha schools, there are smaller, more manageable grade 1 classes, and fewer underage and overage children. Both attendance and retention are better.

Grade 1 performance in all schools is low, especially in Nepali and English. Few children have a solid grasp of basic grade 1 skills and even in the best schools there is continued evidence of rote learning. However, children in program schools are doing significantly better than their peers. The effects of overly large classes in Siraha showed up clearly – children in Kavre, in both program and comparison schools, are doing significantly better than their peers in Siraha.

In Siraha, results indicate that the program has made a significant academic difference for non-dalit children, but not for dalits – a cause for concern, and a reason to reinstate dalit supports that have been recently discontinued.

Children's struggle with the Nepali language is a major factor in their transition to school and their success in grade 1 – and this appears to be related to their psychosocial well being as well. Kavre schools are handling this better, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that learning Nepali is a greater challenge for Tamangs than for Siraha's Maithili-speaking majority.

The results of both the standardized grade 1 test and the psychosocial scale showed, unexpectedly, no significant differences between ECD graduates and those with no ECD experience, despite qualitative findings pointing to greater confidence and a better capacity to cope with school among ECD children. In Kavre, the absence of a significant academic difference is probabaly related to the small sample size of ECD children. In Siraha, two factors appear to be at work: overly rapid expansion with a lack of adequate support leading

to an erosion in the quality of the ECD program; and overcrowded grade 1 classrooms which have meant diminishing support for these children, a failure to build on ECD gains, and considerable discouragement for the children as they adjust to a very different reality from their more secure and pleasurable ECD experience. At the same time, the presence of ECD children in these classrooms has resulted in a generally higher level of expectation and achievement for all children – classes with no ECD children have uniformly lower results. All of these ECD-related results deserve much closer study.

The integrated program supports have been important not only in their effects for schools and children, but in the ways they have affected local community capacity. The direct support and development provided to SMC members; the more general encouragement and learning provided through the SIP process; the parent training made available through ECD; and the experience with ECD management have all provided opportunities for local community members to build their skills and confidence in a number of areas. Qualitative evidence points to higher levels of local participation, a better capacity (on the part of SMCs) to make use of available government resources, a more critical awareness on the part of parents, and a greater tendency to take initiative in improving the schools. There is more ownership of local schools on the part of all stakeholders, and a greater demand for accountability. Overall, this appears to be more consistent in Kavre than in Siraha, where the potential for consistent follow-up and support has been more limited.

Both qualitative findings and the psychosocial scale suggest that stronger schools are in fact producing stronger children – although it remains unclear whether this is the result of the direct impact of the schools, or whether it is mediated by generally stronger communities.

Despite the successes demonstrated by the program schools, there is also much room for improvement. Attention to the following areas is particularly recommended.

Program recommendations

- In Siraha especially, attention should be given to finding a better balance between expanding the program and providing the support necessary to maintaining high quality. This is true for all components of this integrated program – ECD, teacher training, support for SMCs, physical maintenance, record keeping and the rest.
- Efforts should be made to ensure the more genuine representation of women and dalits (or other excluded groups) in SMCs. There is strength in numbers, and women/ dalit members need a stronger presence to be able to draw attention to concerns within the school that may otherwise remain unrecognized and unaddressed.
- It would be valuable also to develop a system for rating the performance of SMCs in various areas, and for determining the extent of parental and community involvement in the schools.
- The SIP process should be regularly updated, with efforts to ensure that the selection of parents and children for this process is truly representative, and that the whole school community is informed of the outcomes.
- Opportunities for active student involvement should become far more routine in all schools. Support should be provided to ensure that these opportunities are genuinely inclusive and respectful of children's capacity to take an active and responsible role.
- Since most SMCs have seen no need to develop policies on most protection issues, SC should consider developing a clear code of conduct for school personnel in collaboration with SMCs, parent groups and the DEO. Just raising general awareness on such issues as abusive or discriminatory behavior may not be adequate to change practices.
- Better mutual support systems among teachers should be encouraged – including regular reflective meetings within schools, and opportunities for teachers from different schools to meet and discuss their challenges and successes – especially in the critical areas of active teaching-learning, and dealing with the challenges of learning Nepali.
- Greater accountability among teachers could be promoted by establishing an evaluation system that includes input from parents and children. This could consist of a few simple questions that could be answered anonymously if necessary, and should be developed in collaboration with community and SMC.
- More encouragement and support appear to be needed to address book and scholarship distribution. The current tendency for everyone to blame everyone else is not productive and keeps too many children from getting the maximum support. The free availability of such low cost items as pencils and notebooks could relieve a good deal of anxiety on the part of children
- The routine use of a standardized test, at least in grade 1, would ensure that the education children are receiving could be more accurately assessed. This test could also be used as a diagnostic tool for determining where support is most needed.

- All possible means should be explored to encourage the awareness and active involvement of parents – for instance, a school bulletin board, regular meetings whether at school or neighborhood level, the provision of parenting education for all parents, whether or not ECD coverage is available for all.
- The possibility of developing a corps of voluntary teacher aids should be explored, especially for overcrowded grade 1 and 2 classrooms. These volunteers could take attendance, check homework, assist with classroom management and help children in and out of class. Even an hour a day could make a difference to what overburdened teachers were capable of accomplishing.
- Consider a "welcome day" for incoming grade 1 children and parents – a day where they can be introduced to the school and teachers, and be given information that will ease children's transition.
- Establishing clear responsibility for the maintenance of clean toilets, the availability of water for both drinking and washing, and the disposal of waste would help to ensure higher standards of health and a more pleasant environment. Separate toilets for boys and girls should be the norm.
- Planting trees would be another simple way, ideally involving children, to create more pleasant outdoor space that seems likely to encourage children to come to school and stay there – this in addition to the stress reducing qualities pointed to by other research.
- Alcohol abuse among adults affects the quality of life for many children in Siraha, exposing them to family stress, domestic violence and abuse, and the wasteful use of scarce household resources. Although this is not generally seen as a school-related issue, the effects for family finances can undermine children's chance for education and increase the risk of drop out — as well as increasing family poverty more generally, with all the attendant risks for children. Any attempt to provide a protective environment for children in this context must take this issue into account. It is recommended that it be discussed within the school community as an issue with profound effects for children's well being and future prospects. As the situation in Nepal shifts, it is not unlikely that the problem could re-emerge in Kavre and would have to be dealt with there too. .

Recommendations for advocacy

Although many of the concerns raised by this research can be addressed within the local context, there is also a clear need for advocacy at a national level, especially at this time in the country's history when there may be an openness to change and accountability. Issues that could particularly use the weight of SC's advocacy would be:

- more investment in human resources to support schools at the district level;
- changes in the national requirement for gender and caste representation in SMCs;
- more effective and honest approaches to teacher evaluation and retention, ideally involving bottom-up as well as top-down assessment;
- a systematic use of standardized assessment of children's learning in the early grades in order to evaluate the performance of schools and identify areas in need of support;
- more attention to the issue of second-language, and to ways of making the transition to school easier for non-Nepali speaking children;
- an internship year for student teachers, as a way to provide added support within under-resourced classrooms;
- continued support for an individual child tracking system as a way of promoting reliable record keeping in Nepali schools and a better understanding of the problems they face;
- advocacy at all levels to protect schools and children from political pressure and influences.

Unless change can be strongly promoted and supported at the district and local level, however, even an acceptance of such policies at the national level would do little to change Nepal's dysfunctional primary education system.

On-going monitoring and research

- Capacity building for in-house researchers in SC could help to promote a culture of critical reflection within the organizations, and also make the use of outside consultants unnecessary.
- The grade 1 cohort of children followed in this research should continue to be tracked through grade 5 with the individual child tracking system. Because the database is in place, valuable information could be collected with minimal effort.
- The ECD puzzle should be investigated further – with a focus on both ECD quality, the transition experience, and the challenges of going to scale.
- In schools where active teaching-learning training has really taken hold, it would be worth taking a "positive deviance" approach to seeing what worked and how it can most effectively be promoted. The same approach could be taken with the language issue in schools, exploring what approaches have worked best, sharing successes, and helping schools to find more effective ways to help children make this important transition. It would make sense to work with parents, teachers and education officials to determine the best way to address this very significant problem.

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