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TECSES INSIGHTS

WHY ARE EDUCATION REFORMS SO CHALLENGING? PERSPECTIVES ON THE FACTORS EXPLAINING THEIR SUCCESS AND FAILURE

2026

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Funded by
the European Union



**SUOMI
FINLAND**

Technical Support Cooperation to School Education Sector (TECSES)

2026

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TECSES INSIGHTS: Why Are Education Reforms So Challenging? – Perspectives on the Factors Explaining Their Success and Failure

Written by Dr. Marko van den Berg

This report examines the factors that have made it challenging, in historical terms, to successfully implement education sector reforms. The history of education includes many examples, from both the global south and the global north, of reforms that have failed, or whose outcomes have turned out to be quite different from what was originally intended. This report identifies the types of factors that have typically been behind these failures and, on the other hand, the kinds of features that are characteristic of reforms considered successful. The purpose of this report is to support the implementation of education reforms in Nepal, particularly from the perspective of actors involved in the TECSES project. Although it is unfortunately impossible to provide a guaranteed formula for successful education reform, understanding the common pitfalls and success factors is useful for all those involved in their planning and implementation.

Why do reforms often fail?

According to the renowned American education researcher Joseph Murphy, education reforms have often turned out to be disappointments when viewed over time. The history of education also includes many examples of reforms that were introduced to fix the failures of earlier ones. Quite often, these hastily launched corrective efforts have also produced disappointing results. It is striking that the reasons behind failed reforms seem to remain broadly similar from one decade to another.¹

Murphy argues that a key underlying cause is that reforms are often based on mistaken assumptions about how the schooling sector works and how change should be carried out. Reforms frequently assume that problems at the school level have a single cause that can be fixed with a simple solution, such as a new curriculum. In reality, schools are complex social systems shaped by many interacting factors, including teachers' work, school leadership,

¹ Murphy 2020, 1-2.

curricula, and the wider social context. Murphy also points out that reform efforts are often weakened by a limited understanding of the history of education. When reformers are not familiar with past developments, they cannot learn from earlier mistakes.² As a result, ideas are presented as new even though they have already been tried before, often with poor results.

University of Pennsylvania researcher Sean Snyder has examined education reforms from the perspective of complexity theory. Like Murphy, Snyder emphasizes that education systems are complex, consisting of many interacting actors. As reforms pass through this system, their outcomes may look very different from what was originally intended. Snyder emphasizes that, due to this complexity, education reforms should not be viewed as simple, linear processes.³ However, traditional reform models often assume that reforms can be centrally designed and implemented according to a fixed plan. From a complexity perspective, this view fails to take into account the true nature of education systems. Different actors often interpret reforms in different ways, and local conditions can strongly shape how reforms are put into practice. Along the way, many small and seemingly minor changes can have a major impact on the final outcome.

Another important reason why reforms fail is that too little attention is often paid to how they are implemented in practice at the school level. There may be no clear plans for embedding reforms into the everyday culture of schools, or such plans may remain very general. Reforms are often expected to take effect more or less automatically once schools are informed about their content. However, informing schools about reforms is not the same as integrating them into daily teaching practices.⁴ Monitoring of implementation is also often insufficient.⁵ As a result, changes tend to remain superficial: organizations may formally adopt new practices, but these changes do not reach the core of teaching and learning—that is, what actually happens in classrooms.

It also appears that relying on research produced by universities does not automatically guarantee successful reforms. One problem is that reform designers often assume that new research knowledge will naturally become part of everyday school practice. In reality, this is not

² Murphy 2020, 7.

³ Snyder 2013, 9-13.

⁴ See also Cuban 1990.

⁵ Viennet & Pont 2017, 11; Hess 2013.

necessarily the case. Schools and their staff are embedded in established structures and routines. For example, teachers often trust methods that have proven to work in practice rather than the latest research findings. They may also feel that new knowledge is not directly relevant to their daily work.⁶ As a result, even research-based reforms may have only a limited impact on everyday school life.

Another factor that makes reforms challenging is the large number of actors involved in their design and implementation—politicians, university researchers, business representatives, government officials, and others. These actors do not always communicate sufficiently with one another, and reform processes can become fragmented. Tensions between different actors and their differing starting points are also common. In addition, some actors may have a limited understanding of how schools actually function.⁷ For example, representatives from the business sector may propose reforms that work well in business contexts but are less suitable for education, which operates according to a different logic.⁸ A weak understanding of everyday school life can lead to reforms that teachers see as unrealistic or unnecessary.

Finally, education reform processes often overlook the views of two key groups: teachers and students.⁹ Teachers are frequently seen mainly as implementers of reforms, with limited opportunities to influence them. Students are often in a similar position. This is paradoxical, since reforms are usually intended to improve learning in one way or another. Despite this, students' perspectives are rarely taken into account, even though their experiences are central to learning. Ignoring the views of key actors can weaken commitment to reforms and reduce their chances of success.

Key Features of Successful Education Reforms

Although researchers often emphasize the difficulty and complexity of education reforms, there are also many encouraging examples, particularly from Asian countries in recent decades, of highly successful reforms. These successes do not, however, occur by chance; rather, they

⁶ Murphy 2020, 6-7; See also Cuban 2010.

⁷ Gomendio & Wert 2023.

⁸ Peck & A Reitzug 2014.

⁹ Murphy 2020, 9-10.

typically share certain common features. The following section examines the general characteristics that successful education reforms have in common.

Shared leadership

Australian researchers Felicity McLure and Jill Aldridge, who specialize in education reform implementation and educational change, published a literature review in 2023 that synthesizes findings from more than 200 studies on education reform.¹⁰ Based on this work, they identify several observations that can, to some extent, be generalized about the features of successful reforms.

At a general level, the success of reforms appears to be supported by a culture of shared leadership. This refers to leadership structures that are not based solely on top-down decision-making. In shared leadership, teachers and their representatives are also involved in preparing decisions and planning how reforms will be implemented. Many studies suggest that shared leadership strengthens a culture of collaboration and increases staff commitment to common goals.¹¹ It also builds trust between school leadership and teachers, which in turn improves the chances of successful reform.

Similar findings have been reported by the German statistician and education researcher Andreas Schleicher, a key figure in the development of the OECD's PISA assessments. According to Schleicher, international comparisons show that education systems where school leaders involve teachers in decision-making about school development tend to perform above average in terms of learning outcomes.¹² Successful education reforms are also typically characterized by the distribution of responsibility for both planning and implementation. It seems particularly important that teachers are involved in planning how reforms are carried out, and that they have the autonomy to decide how to apply changes in their own work. In addition, involving students and parents in the implementation process is associated with a higher likelihood of successful reform.¹³

¹⁰ McLure & Aldridge 2023.

¹¹ McLure & Aldridge 2023, 77.

¹² Schleicher 2016, 59-60.

¹³ McLure & Aldridge 2023, 82-82.

Supporting Teachers

An important factor behind successful education reforms is the extent to which those responsible for implementation are supported during the process. In practice, this includes measures such as in-service training for teachers. It is essential that teachers understand how reforms affect classroom practice in concrete terms.

The most effective forms of support appear to be those that focus directly on teaching practices. In other words, teachers are supported in adapting their everyday teaching to reflect the changes introduced by reforms. It is also important that teachers have a say in how professional development is tailored to meet their needs.¹⁴ Encouraging support from school leadership also plays a key role. When principals encourage teachers to try new approaches and communicate that failure is acceptable, teachers are more likely to feel safe and more committed to the reform process.¹⁵

One strategy that has produced positive results is strengthening peer support among teachers. This can be done, for example, by organizing shared planning time, where teachers can work together to reflect on how reforms affect teaching and to develop new practices. Research also shows clearly that if teachers are not given opportunities to address the practical challenges of reforms, or are not provided with concrete examples of how reforms affect their work, changes in classroom practice tend to remain limited.¹⁶

A common concern among teachers is that they are not given enough time to adopt and process reforms. This challenge is often made worse by the fact that reforms can increase workload through additional planning and administrative tasks. As a result, initial enthusiasm may fade, and the effects of reforms may remain short-lived. On the other hand, many studies show that

¹⁴ McLure & Aldridge 2023, 80.

¹⁵ Hollingworth et al. 2018.

¹⁶ McLure & Aldridge 2023, 83-84.

reforms are more likely to have lasting effects when schools allocate sufficient time for teacher training and collaborative work.

Support from external advisory groups has also been shown to be valuable in many cases. These groups may include, for example, university researchers who work in collaboration with schools to support the implementation of change. Their role may involve developing research-based action plans and providing training and guidance for teachers and school leaders.

However, when working with external support teams, it is important that schools retain enough autonomy in deciding how recommendations are put into practice. It is equally important that teachers can express their views freely and in confidence. At the same time, involving external consultants does not automatically lead to positive outcomes. The risk of failure increases, for example, if the role of the support group is unclear or if it does not take sufficient account of local conditions and teachers' perspectives.¹⁷

Monitoring Reform Progress and Funding

Successful implementation of education reforms requires a clear understanding of how the changes are progressing. Effective data collection and the sharing of that data with schools are typical features of successful reforms. In contrast, unsuccessful reforms are often characterized by limited or completely absent data collection.¹⁸ Research suggests that neglecting data collection may partly stem from concerns that the data could reveal weak implementation of reforms in schools.¹⁹ This is somewhat paradoxical, as a clear, evidence-based picture of the situation would make it possible to take appropriate corrective actions.

Funding also plays a central role in the success of reforms, particularly its continuity and flexibility. Reforms are more likely to fail when funding does not continue throughout the entire change process or when it is too rigid and does not respond to the needs of schools. The likelihood of success increases when schools have autonomy in deciding how funding is allocated. In such cases, resources are more likely to be directed toward the actual needs of the reform, such as teaching materials, technology, and staff training. By contrast, highly centralized

¹⁷ McLure & Aldridge 2023, 86; Craig 2012, 24-25.

¹⁸ McLure & Aldridge 2023, 80-81.

¹⁹ Koyama & Kania. 2016, 18-19;

funding decisions (for example, at the state level) increase the risk that resources are not used in ways that effectively support implementation.

From the perspective of successful reform, it is especially beneficial when funding can be directed toward teachers' professional development or used to support collaborative planning and development work within schools.²⁰

A Complexity Theory Perspective on Successful Education Reforms

A central idea in complexity theory is that complex problems should not be approached as simple "one cause, one solution" issues. Instead, they should be understood as complex systems in which many factors interact with one another. Education system reforms typically fall into this category.

A common mistake in education reforms is to underestimate the complexity of the problems and to assume that the solutions are simple and technical.²¹ For example, poor student literacy may be attributed to a single factor, such as a lack of textbooks, with the assumption that the problem can be solved simply by providing more books. In reality, the issue is likely shaped by a much more complex set of causes. Literacy is influenced by many factors, including teaching methods, cultural values placed on reading, parental attitudes, and education policies.

According to Sean Snyder, successful education reforms start with recognizing the complexity of education systems. If reforms focus on only one factor, or, on the other hand, attempt to influence too many variables at once, the outcome is likely to differ from what was originally intended. Addressing a single factor may not be enough to create meaningful change, while spreading efforts too widely can overload available resources. Since not everything can be changed at once, Snyder suggests that reforms should focus on so-called leverage points within the system.²² Interventions targeted at these points can, at best, trigger positive chain reactions. The task of reform designers and implementers is therefore to identify the factors that have the greatest influence on the issue they aim to change.

²⁰ McLure & Aldridge 2023, 78-79; Bishop et al. 2012; Epstein 2005.

²¹ Snyder 2013, 6-9, 13.

²² Snyder 2013, 12, 18.

Complex systems are difficult to manage through rigid, centralized control. For this reason, Snyder emphasizes that education reforms should be adaptive and flexible. Flexibility, in turn, requires an accurate understanding of how reforms are progressing. Continuous feedback collection is therefore essential. Ideally, practices should be adjusted quickly and flexibly when feedback indicates a need for change.²³

Snyder also highlights the importance of collecting feedback from multiple sources. To gain an accurate picture of reform progress, feedback should be gathered from a wide range of stakeholders, including teachers, principals, students, and researchers.

As an example of a successful reform, Snyder points to a major education system reform launched in Hong Kong in year 2000.²⁴ Before the reform, learning in the region's schools was largely based on teacher-centered lectures and memorization for exams. The reform aimed to shift toward more student-centered learning. The goal was not only to build knowledge, but also to develop skills such as critical thinking, communication, and lifelong learning. Teaching methods were redesigned to engage students more actively, and the use of information technology in education was increased. Another key objective was to reduce the strong emphasis on exams and to expand the use of formative assessment. This shift applied across the entire education system. For example, university admissions criteria were changed so that selection was no longer based solely on exam performance.

According to Snyder, several mutually reinforcing factors contributed to the success of the Hong Kong reform. The reform was guided by a clear vision to which all key actors were committed. During a 20-month preparation phase, dozens of seminars were organized, involving large numbers of teachers, principals, researchers, officials, and politicians. Once the reform began, continuous feedback was collected from different stakeholders. This feedback was not merely symbolic; the reform was continuously adjusted based on what was learned.

The process was also long-term in nature. The goals were not expected to be achieved quickly, but through sustained effort over many years. Similar successful reforms have been carried out elsewhere in Asia in recent decades. Snyder highlights Singapore and South Korea as examples,

²³ Snyder 2013, 15-19.

²⁴ Snyder 2013, 22-23.

where school education has been developed in ways similar to Hong Kong.²⁵ According to Snyder, shared success factors include the active involvement of teachers in both planning and implementation, as well as consistent, long-term education policies with clear national visions.

Turning Reforms into Results in Nepal's Education System

Most research on education reforms focuses on whether and how they are implemented in schools. However, there is no reason why the perspectives offered by the research literature could also not be applied to reforms concerning, for example, university teaching staff. These, too, involve changes within expert organizations that ultimately aim to improve learning outcomes in the desired direction.

Greatly simplifying a complex reality, research on education reforms can be summarized, for example, as follows:

1. Education reforms are highly complex processes, and therefore their successful implementation is very challenging.
2. A culture of shared leadership—where those responsible for implementation (as well as target groups) can express their views and influence how reforms are carried out—appears to increase the likelihood of success.
3. A common weak point in education reforms is implementation. Those responsible for carrying out reforms need substantial support, and progress should be closely monitored.
4. A flexible leadership culture, where practices can be adjusted quickly based on feedback, increases the likelihood of successful reform.

As noted above, even research evidence does not provide a ready-made magic formula for successful education reform. However, it can help avoid the most common pitfalls and draw attention to factors known to increase the likelihood of success. What does this mean in practice in the Nepalese context?

²⁵ Snyder 2013,

First, those designing reforms should recognize the complex nature of educational change highlighted by research. Education reforms typically involve numerous stakeholders who may also have conflicting interests, making them particularly difficult to manage. These observations underline the importance of careful preparation. This includes ensuring that all actors involved in both the design and implementation of the reform share a common understanding of its goals. It is also generally not advisable to try to reform everything at once. It is wiser to focus on a specific issue and its key leverage points.

According to research, a common stumbling block in education reforms is weak implementation. Monitoring progress is often limited or entirely absent. An approach that assumes reforms will be implemented almost automatically once, for example, a new curriculum has been developed, is unlikely to lead to successful outcomes. This widely observed phenomenon would likely be wise to take into account also in the ongoing curriculum reform of teacher education programs in Nepali universities. All universities collaborating in the TECSES project share the aim of making teacher education more practice-oriented. In concrete terms, this involves, for instance, increasing the emphasis on teaching practice and on courses that integrate theory with practice.

Research on education reform emphasizes that a content-defining output of a reform (in this case, a new curriculum for teacher education) is only the beginning of a long process. The most challenging part of reform is embedding new approaches in everyday teaching practice. Research on education reform consistently shows that this does not happen automatically. University teaching staff, for example, need sufficient time to design new types of courses. Equally important is that they are allowed to provide feedback on how the reform is progressing, and that they feel this feedback has a direct influence on how the reform is implemented in practice. The perspectives of other stakeholders, such as students, should also be taken into account in order to obtain a realistic picture of the situation.

In practice, monitoring implementation may involve, for example, classroom observations, various types of surveys, and interviews with different stakeholders. Key questions that efforts to monitor the implementation of teacher education reform in Nepal seek to address may include, for example:

- Have teaching methods become more student-centred and participatory?

- Is teaching practice organised in a way that ensures students receive sufficient expert feedback on their lessons?
- Do students feel they understand how the theoretical components of teacher education relate to classroom practice?
- What kinds of challenges have teaching staff encountered in implementing the reform?
- Do teacher educators receive enough support for implementing the new curriculum?

The primary purpose of feedback is to generate information for potential corrective action. The ability to adapt practices flexibly when needed is a key feature of successful education reforms.

In addition to supporting curriculum reform in teacher education at partner universities, TECSES experts are also involved in revising Nepal's national Teacher Competency Framework. Here, too, close attention should be paid to implementation—specifically, how the revised framework is reflected in teacher education practices and, ultimately, in everyday classroom teaching in schools.

The ultimate goal of most education reforms is to improve teaching and learning outcomes in schools. This is also the aim of the teacher education reforms supported by the TECSES project. The effects should therefore gradually become visible in school practice. It would be highly advisable to monitor this as well, for example, by focusing on newly qualified teachers working in selected schools across different parts of the country. Areas of interest might include:

- Do newly qualified teachers use student-activating teaching methods?
- To what extent do they teach not only subject content but also broader skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and digital competence?
- Do teachers receive sufficient support for using new teaching approaches, and are there structural or cultural factors within schools that hinder their implementation?

In this context, too, the purpose of feedback is not to assign blame for any emerging problems but to inform appropriate corrective measures. Overall, flexible approaches appear to significantly increase the likelihood of successful education reform. This flexibility also applies to leadership: rather than relying solely on top-down directives and rigidly predefined procedures, it is advisable to favour decision-making models that allow plans to be adjusted as

needed. This, in turn, requires a leadership culture in which those responsible for implementing reforms—as well as their target groups—are genuinely heard and have real opportunities to influence how reforms are carried out in practice.

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