



Location of Early Childhood Education in National Geographies: Indonesia, Nepal, Slovakia

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative analysis of early childhood education in three countries on two continents – Slovakia, Indonesia and Nepal. The analysis is based on long-term observations and research in ECEC in these countries. It shows that education mirrors culture, reflecting key aspects of it – physical, political, cultural and religious. Despite strong globalizing pressures to change and modernize, education is a localized phenomenon. ECEC is presented through its geographical contexts and geography of education is considered a suitable methodology for further research in ECEC. The article looks at how geographical characteristics shape education in the countries compared and briefly outlines the effect religious faith has on education in different countries and parts of the world.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper brings together the work of researchers from two completely different geographical, social and cultural environments, and so concentrates on international and comparative education perspectives. It is the partial outcome of collaboration between an academic representing the European culture and tradition of education and an academic from India now working in Nepal. Both have worked and conducted research on each continent. The first author is from Slovakia in Central Europe. He has spent around two of the last five years conducting comparative research in very different Asian (and African) countries (primarily Indonesia, Nepal, India and Kenya). The second author has extensive knowledge of local cultures within a particular section of Asian culture, and his thorough knowledge of the terrain provides the backdrop and context to the data and observations in the comparative investigations.

Education as the Mirror of Culture

When we consider all the various aspects of the European and Asian cultures in these countries, including their education systems, we are struck by just how different they are and the opportunities they provide for comparative research. As a researcher who has worked for many years in a contrasting environment alongside academics with shared research interests, it seemed quite natural, both materially and methodologically, to launch a very open-ended research project that brings together newly emerging themes that could change our ideas about where education is headed in different parts of the world in the globalized era.

Our main research interest is the wide-ranging sphere of early childhood education and care. It is in this field that the initial beginnings of our international work are to be found and it is where we have built up our professional contacts in the countries investigated here. We have spent most of our time observing the institutional backdrop and historical development of ECEC in these countries, looking at how ECEC policy has developed within the various regions, spending many hours interviewing key actors such as teachers, heads, trustees, leaders of professional organizations and academics specializing in this field and above all in directly observing the teaching and activities that take place in ECEC centers.

Although most of the knowledge we have acquired relates directly to ECEC, much of it extends further, relating to more general aspects of

education, or telling us something about a culture through its education system. There is one important general point that is worth noting right from the start. However we look at education and in whichever country, region or area, the insights we obtain do not simply relate to education but allow us to grasp something of the culture of the country, region or area. The question then arises, do we need to understand the culture first before we can understand education and its place in that? Or can we begin with education and then come to understand the culture through it?

Logically the first of these options would seem to be the correct one. Yet experience tells us that the second is also both possible and methodologically appropriate. Many of the questions that arise during comparative research in an education setting in fact relate directly to the cultural (social, economic, geographic) circumstances and backdrop to education. It is through education settings that we can access the wider environment and coordinates of life in that culture. From this perspective then, education mirrors the culture, and is not a means of changing that culture as policy declarations frequently assume and indeed insist upon. Education is both the correlate and derivative of culture to which existing cultural models are applied in the expectation that the culture will undergo acceptable social change. But these changes have their own cultural limits and underpinning despite being increasingly glossed over in the globalizing rhetoric.

There is one more methodological point we should make. Our international research is a long-term project that has no clearly defined subject matter, established themes, questions or object of research. It is a process of discovery in which the research questions, knowledge and subject of observation and investigation emerge during the process of observation and independently of the sources and experiences that come gradually over time and through the opportunities that present themselves for participating in the education setting. The questions and factors emerge through the processes of observing and participating and are then studied in detail. The answers emerge gradually as the interpretative schemata of "the foreigner" and "the locals" are confronted with one another. In this type of research and use of method, there are no traditional research models for the epistemology and thematization (theme, methods, data collection, data processing according to the canon of research methods, objective interpretation). Instead it is about the epistemology of knowledge, evoked by experiencing the new events and phenomena

that emerge before the researcher. When the researcher is a “foreigner”, the level of perception is heightened by the new optics through which the setting is viewed, a perspective that is unfamiliar to “the locals”, for whom the events are normal, everyday routines of no particular significance. The epistemology of perceived experience becomes fruitful and legitimate when confronted with the experiences of individuals from different worlds and with different perceptions of the reality revealed before them.

In this paper the insights that are analyzed and contrasted were obtained in Indonesia, Nepal and Slovakia. This is partly because it is in Indonesia and Nepal that the first author of the paper has had multiple opportunities to explore the culture and education there, and compare it with his own (Slovak, central European) domestic setting. And partly because he has collaborated with the second author for a number of years now, who, although originally from Kerala in India has spent most of his life in Nepal and its education settings. We will therefore select the most striking aspects of the cultural and regional differences in preschool education and apply a comparative approach to gain a better understanding of the cultural contexts and local underpinning.

Localized Comparison

We will begin by briefly describing the main characteristics of the countries we will be discussing. Slovakia is a small country with a population of around 5.4 million people located in central Europe. Until 1993 it was part of Czechoslovakia, and until 1989 it was one of the Soviet bloc satellite countries. It is now a European Union member state. It has a temperate climate with four seasons. Temperatures range from plus 35 degrees Celsius in summer to possible lows of minus 20 Celsius in winter. It is a relatively homogeneous culture – culturally, ethnically and linguistically.

By contrast Indonesia is a much more populous country of 265 million inhabitants. It is formed of islands and was formerly a Dutch colony (and belonged briefly to Japan). In 1945 it became an independent sovereign country with a parliamentary democracy and dynamic economy. It extends along the equator and has a tropical climate with two distinct seasons (a dry season and a rainy season) and small temperature differences. It is an ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse country with hundreds of different ethnic groups, languages and dialects.

The third country, Nepal, is an underdeveloped country located between India and China,

with a population of 28.6 million people. It became a unified country in the 18th century and a parliamentary democracy in 1952, but was twice suppressed by Nepalese monarchs and it was not until 2008 that Nepal became a secular republic with a reinstated parliamentary democracy. Like Indonesia it is an ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse country, containing more than 120 different ethnic groups and a similar number of languages and dialects. Geographically it is a very distinctive country, with three physiographic regions known as Himal, Pahad and Terai. The north of the country is formed of the Himalaya mountains, containing Mount Everest (8,848 meters), the highest peak in the world. Pahad is another mountainous area with lower peaks up to 4,000 meters high. Terai contains the lowlands and is located in the south of the country. The climate reflects the geography, with subarctic and arctic climates in the mountains over 3,600 meters, a subtropical climate in the mid-mountain ranges and a subtropical to tropical climate in the lowlands in the south. There are generally five seasons: summer, the monsoon season, autumn, winter and spring.

Characteristics of National ECEC Settings

Let us look briefly at the historical context of ECEC in Indonesia, Nepal and Slovakia. We should not be surprised to learn that ECEC is strongly institutionalized and state-regulated in Slovakia. Its ECEC is underpinned by the strong European tradition of education and is supported by a well-developed economy and high living standards. But this does not fully explain the strong position ECEC occupies in the education system because historically early years care was primarily about providing social care to children at risk (the educational purpose of early years care started to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century). However, the developed, state-regulated and strongly supported ECEC networks typically found in central and eastern European states are better explained by politics and the fact that from the end of the Second World War to the late 1990s these countries were part of the Soviet-led Communist bloc.

The Communist bloc countries, including what was then Czechoslovakia, were run along the principles of a state-centralized economy in which private property was abolished and the Communist Party was in charge of the state administration. The official ideology was Marxism, and atheism was the life philosophy. Education, healthcare and social services were free and available to all. Education, especially free education,

on, was centrally run and highly regulated, with qualified teachers who were capable of instilling communist values into the new generations.

Since education is a powerful tool for the dissemination of ideology, it was the focus of attention in socialist countries. Preschool education was particularly heavily promoted. The availability of centrally controlled preschooling also explains the fact that postcommunist countries have had centrally regulated education programs (national ECEC curriculums) since the 1950s. In Czechoslovakia the first such curriculum was introduced in 1953 and then reviewed and methodologically updated to reflect reforms. The centralist ECEC tradition in these countries is mainly evident in the uniform network of ECEC institutions. There are two types: kindergartens (for children aged 2.5 to 6 years) and play groups (for the under threes). Attempts to diversify ECEC have been very slow and drawn out. It is worth noting that the vast majority of preschools have traditionally been state/public funded.

In countries like Indonesia and Nepal the backdrop to and historical development of ECEC is quite different. Their autonomous national education systems and efforts to ensure widely accessible and freely available education are associated with gaining independence (Indonesia) and installing democracy (Nepal). In these countries government efforts in ECEC became more comprehensive and dynamic in the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium.

In Nepal the earliest ECE policy directions can be found in the 1990 Constitution and the Self Governance Act of 1999. Both these documents emphasized that ECE was a priority. The latter mandated the formation of Village Development Committees (VDCs) as autonomous corporate bodies and empowered them to establish and manage pre-primary classes, including in the community's first language (Ministry of Law & Justice, 1999). Since then there have been regular political declarations prioritizing ECEC in various government documents about expanding the ECEC network in the form of pre-primary classes in elementary schools and community-based ECE centers.

Significantly there was a strong global impetus at the beginning of the new millennium to expand ECEC in Nepal, through the 2000 Dakar Forum (UNESCO, 2000). In Nepal the Basic and Primary Education Program Implementation Plan for 1999–2004, and the Education for All National Plan of Action (EFA/NPA 2001–2015) were drafted and promulgated in order to expand and improve ECEC in the country. The

first of these recommended forming committees and establishing functional units at various levels in order to institutionalize the coordination of ECD activities (World Bank, 2000). The second, brought out in 2003, gave a clear direction to ECE practices in Nepal. Numerous government strategies were subsequently produced, including a national ECEC framework curriculum in 2004 (Government of Nepal, 2063).

Similarly, in Indonesia, where the ECEC network had developed gradually within the private sector and without state assistance, the Dakar Forum provided the impetus for more strategic national coordination of ECEC. The systematic central regulation of the ECEC sector was therefore practically and symbolically linked with the year 2001, when the Ministry of Education and Culture set up the Directorate for Early Childhood. It was at this point that efforts were focused on developing a national Indonesian ECEC, making it more systematic and starting up mass training for preschool teachers and creating binding central curriculums for ECEC.

Despite its strongly regulated ECEC sector, and unlike in Nepal and Slovakia, the institutional basis of ECEC in Indonesia was largely in the hands of the private sector because historically that is how this segment developed. Its ECEC network is extremely diverse and complicated. ECEC is provided by a variety of institutions bearing different names and is unusual, especially when compared internationally, in having an institutionalized network with a simple central curriculum for formal, non-formal and informal education. The situation is further blurred by the fact that these institutions (e.g. playgroups and kindergartens) can exist under one roof (Hasan, Hyson, & Chang, 2013; Denboba, Hasan, & Wodon, 2015). As we have noted, the institutional basis of Slovakia's ECEC is very homogenous, with only two types of institution providing ECEC, both of which belong in the formal education category. ECEC provision in Nepal is also less ambiguous and has a more basic structure.

The institutional basis of Nepal's ECEC lies somewhere between a diversified system and a homogenous system. ECEC is provided in school-based pre-primary classes (for children aged four and over up until the age elementary school begins) and in community-based kindergartens (usually for 3–5 year olds). Both are publicly funded institutions (that also receive support from other sources such as NGOs). In addition there is a network of private kindergartens (or pre-primary classes in private elementary schools), but these receive no public funding. It

has a transparent network of formal ECEC, of greatly varying quality, availability and resources, and less qualified staff than in either Indonesia or Slovakia (Bhandari, 2017). Here we need only note that the staff are not considered teachers, but are referred to as facilitators in the documentation. Not long ago the minimal qualifications were raised so now they should have some form of higher secondary education. Training consists of short pre-employment courses only. In this respect the quality of the ECEC in Nepal deserves serious attention.

Notwithstanding the differences in ECEC provision in each country, they are all linked by the universal global imperative to expand and greatly improve quality with adequate state regulation and support. National ECEC standards and curriculums contain universally shared ideas about the quality of ECEC and require as many children as possible to attend preschool so all children have an equal opportunity to achieve the same successes throughout their school careers (the social dimension of ECEC) and to develop their abilities and participate in the development of society, especially economic production (the economic dimension of ECEC). All ECEC policies target this and in that sense lead to very similar ideas about how ECEC should be provided, as can be seen in the uniformity of ECEC discourse across countries and in the national curricular documents that contain few local differences.

Anchoring ECEC in Regional Geographies

In reality, however, there is far more differentiation and flexibility in ECEC than one would expect simply from looking at national policy documents. There are many factors determining the character of preschool institutions, what goes on inside them, the education culture of the institution and its mission. As suggested above, education institutions tend to reflect the culture in which they are located rather than the stated expectations and political requirements. ECEC institutions exist within their own specific environments, are staffed by individuals and reflect the local values, opportunities and behavior models. In what follows we shall look at some of these factors.

One important local factor affecting ECEC institutions is the geographical setting, climatic conditions and general physiography of the country they are situated in. Here we shall consider just a few of the many different dimensions. Even just looking at education management, we are immediately confronted with questions about the effectiveness and potentialities inherent in the

central management of ECEC in different geographies. Looking at the pay-offs between centralization and autonomy, we find there is no single solution that can be applied simultaneously to an easily accessed sector in a country of 5.4 (Slovakia), one that is mountainous with remote areas and a population that is 16 times larger (Nepal) or one that is spread out over 17 thousand islands with a population 55 times greater than that of Slovakia (Indonesia, which has a population half that of the EU).

These questions can be asked about state administration in general, but apply also to ECEC and national curricular policy since curriculums reflect local values and culture. In Slovakia, a small country, the relationship between central and local curricular policy is continually being renegotiated in an attempt to strengthen the autonomy of schools and local communities. But if this is a problem in Slovakia, then we can quite legitimately ask whether it is even possible to have a centrally set curriculum that reflects local and regional culture in a country as expansive as Indonesia. Given the extremely diverse geographic settings in Indonesia, a centralized ECEC program could presumably quite easily become an elusive curricular tool unsuited to such a large, diverse country.

The second geographical and climatic factor concerns the implementation of ECEC programs. The geographical setting or area has a direct impact on the preschool curriculum in use. This is why we mentioned the seasons when describing the characteristics of each country. No other education level is as closely linked to the seasons (and weather conditions) as preschool education.

In Slovak (and Czech) education programs for instance, the syllabus is structured around the four seasons (see e.g. the preschool program by Gebhartová & Opravilová, 2003). The changing climate over the year acts as an orientational node within the curriculum and is the means whereby preschool children come to understand the life cycle. It is a sort of repeating life regimen organizing the culture in a way that is accessible to the children and then recycled from year to year. Many educational activities are closely linked to the different phases (topics based around typical seasonal activities such as the autumn harvest), and the kindergartens and classrooms are visual representations of this (decorated to show the fallen autumn leaves and the snow of winter and winter festivals etc.) and even the school year is divided up according to the seasonal cycle (the kindergartens are not shut during the holidays,

but have reduced opening hours in summer). The seasons are also reflected in the dress culture and related self-care.

In the classroom the seasons are made visible through the children's artwork and in poetry and music (art activities and techniques follow the seasons as do children's songs, while sport and physical exercise are directly affected, with outdoor activities reflecting the seasonal weather conditions (for example, snowballing, skating, sledging and sliding in the snow in winter).

The structuring of the curriculum and kindergarten life around the seasons is further enhanced by the seasonal festivals of Christmas and Easter, which are presented as secular rather than religious symbols of the season (with Christmas symbolizing winter and Easter symbolizing autumn). The seasonal activities represented in education reflect the typical cultural patterns of the country and cannot be transferred to different geographical conditions. Different geographies convey different cultural patterns since geography is linked not only to the climate but also to the economy and politics. The geography and climate of Nepal has a similar impact on the way school life is organized in its various regions, and the geographical location of the educational establishment determines the beginning and end of the school holidays.

Of course it is not simply a case of the geography determining the curriculum or the impact of the geographical conditions on how education is managed. The links between geography and education go much further. In fact they are so interconnected that the geography of education has now become an established area of comparative studies and research. Scholars in this field continue to emphasize the importance of understanding geography as one of the many factors shaping the educational patterns of nations, including religion, language and the economy (Hans, 2011). One cannot understand, appreciate and investigate the true meaning of a nation's education system without first understanding the history and traditions of the social, political and geographical fabric (Pollack, 1993).

One of our primary motives for investigating the geography of education in greater detail is a surprising finding that emerged out of the encounters and conversations between the European author of this article and Nepalese children attending a primary school in the region of Pahad. Noticing a group of children making their way up a mountain pathway after school, he asked them how long the school journey took them. The following is a summary of one of the boys descrip-

tions: He gets up at five in the morning, does an hour's preparation for school, then gets his school things ready and sets out on the three-hour journey to school. Lessons begin at nine o'clock and end at three o'clock. The journey back takes three hours and he arrives home at seven o'clock. He then has three hours of free time in the evening before going to bed. And he does that every day, six days a week from Sunday to Friday – Saturday is the only day off. Despite the many obstacles, he attends school regularly.

This account tells us something about the accessibility of education in local terrains, but it also points to the wider economic and political backdrop linked to the geography of education. Nepal is a good example of how these visibly interconnect and so is worth exploring further.

We will begin by reminding ourselves of Nepal's geography. Topographically Nepal can be divided up into three types of land surface: the plains (Terai), the hilly region (Pahad) and the trans-Himalayan region (Himal). The plains are located within a narrow tropical belt where altitudes range from 150 to 1,200 meters. They cover roughly 17% of the country's land surface and represent two thirds of Nepal's cultivable land. The hilly region constitutes about 60% of Nepal's total land surface. This region is formed of a wide mass of hills and valleys with altitudes ranging from 600 to 4,500 meters. It is the most inhabited part and contains the Kathmandu valley, and has traditionally played a vital role in Nepal's social, political and economic development. The trans-Himalayan region is located north of the hilly region and contains mountains with altitudes ranging from 4,500 to 8,848 meters and forms part of the great Himalayas. This part of Nepal is sparsely populated (Aryal, 1982). Studies in comparative education have shown that the topography of Nepal is an important determinant of low or high educational attainment. It has been pointed out that the ethnic groups, many of whom reside in the challenging mountain environments and poorer regions of the country, experience higher rates of attrition (Acharya, 1979; Shrestha, 1985).

The comparatist proposition that geographical marginalization results in economic and political and educational marginalization has proven to be true. Geographical marginalization is directly related to ethnic marginalization as the intertwining of geography and ethnicity in Nepal shows (Aryal, 1982). With the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution of Nepal, the country embraced a federal structure and was divided into seven provinces. While the boundaries primarily reflect a complex labyrinth of social, ethnic, lin-

guistic and religious diversity, the geographical dimensions cannot be ignored. The following map (Map 1) is a visual representation of Nepal's provinces.

Map 1. Nepal's provinces



Source: <http://nepalsbuzzpage.com/new-map-of-nepal-with-7-province/>

All the provinces, except Province 2, contain part of the three topographical regions. Province 2 is the only one to contain plains only. The assumption that greater geographical access results in better educational attainment and vice versa is true in Nepal's case.

Below is a table presenting the gross enrolment rate and net enrolment rate in the provinces (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Table 1. Gross and net enrolment rates at primary (Grades 1–8) and secondary (Grades 9–12) level by province

	Primary Education (Grade 1–8)		Secondary Education (Grade 9–12)	
	GER (%)	NER (%)	GER (%)	NER (%)
Province 1	124.1	94.7	59.3	46.0
Province 2	104.3	79.2	41.0	37.9
Province 3	125.2	94.8	69.0	48.2
Province 4	124.3	94.8	73.7	44.7
Province 5	118.9	91.2	54.9	40.5
Province 6	121.2	93.2	59.4	42.0
Province 7	116.9	94.8	62.8	44.7
Total	120.1	92.3	60.6	43.9

Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2017, p.39)

It is commonly assumed that better geographical access leads to more schools and ultimately better educational attainment levels. This applies to Nepal as well. For example, the educa-

tional attainment rate is much lower in Province 7 than in Province 3. Province 7 is located in the far west of Nepal where access is geographically limited. While Province 3 lies in the center of Nepal and has better geographical access and a better educational attainment rate.

The exception to this is Province 2. It is the most accessible region in Nepal because it is entirely flat and has no mountainous terrain. Theoretically that should mean that Province 2 has more schools and better educational attainment levels than the other provinces. But in fact Province 2 has the lowest levels of educational attainment as shown by statistics issued by the Ministry of Education (2017). This “anomaly” needs investigating further.

The relationship between education and geographical conditions was documented above using school attendance data for primary and secondary schools. There is probably a stronger link with ECEC attendance, as that relies on parental willingness. That willingness falls in relation to ability to access preschool, fees charged and the mother's level of educational attainment (Ministry of Education, 2015).

In all parts of the world, geographical space, political space and economic space are directly linked. A region's economic space has a major impact on educational attainment. Studies in comparative international education show how the lack of economic space affects the traditional ability of the nation state to define its own education policies (Larsen, 2010).

At another level, processes associated with globalization have forced theorists to reconceptualize space. Globalization theorists refer to the compression of space/time and simultaneously the homogenization of cultural, socio-economic and political forms, as well as *detritorialization*, diversity and dispersion (Held et al., 1999). These transformations, at the local and global levels, are prompting educationists to consider wider and more complex concepts of space in their own comparative work (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2012).

There is a call for more flexible and expansive notions of space and spatiality in comparative education research. The idea is to broaden conceptions of space to extend beyond the nation-state, which has traditionally occupied much of the attention. New spaces as units of analysis could include regional spaces (e.g. comparisons of the urban, suburban and rural) but also supra-national regions. Comparative work in this area could also be undertaken in cross-regional, inter-regional and intra-regional studies (Larsen, 2010).

We could no doubt find similar geographical analyses to our one of Nepal and apply them to the highly diverse areas of Indonesia (for example Kurniawan & Wahyudin, 2014). Even in Slovakia, a much smaller country geographically, we can find issues relating directly to the geographical context. For some years now, the Slovak authorities have been trying to resolve questions regarding the effectiveness of small schools in areas with small populations. One education policy solution that is frequently proposed is to close the small schools and transport the pupils to more economically effective schools further away. But that raises questions about the impact on cultural patterns in a community that loses its school, considered to be a key aspect of the cultural existence of the local community.

Religious “infrastructure”

*O, God who are truth and the source of all knowledge,
Bless our studies which we consecrate to you.
Enlighten our minds,
Strengthen our memories,
Direct our wills
Towards what is right.
Grant us to seek truth always,
And make us truly wise.*

This prayer can be heard in Nepal's schools every morning, at least in the schools the Jesuits founded. In 1951 King Tribuvan Shah invited the Jesuits to come and help expand education in Nepal, which at that time had very low levels of literacy (under 5%). The prayer is said in Nepal's Jesuit schools; although the vast majority of pupils belong to the Hindu religion. Hindu is Nepal's largest religion (81.3% of the population is Hindu, a larger proportion than in India for example). Nepal is a secular country, but most people are Hindu and the constitution forbids attempts at converting the population. Consequently, neither the Jesuit nor the Catholic schools, attended by Hindu children as well, provide religious education lessons. The prayer that can be heard in these schools is secular and appeals to an abstract, universal god with no link to a particular religion.

Both Indonesia and Slovakia are similar to Nepal in terms of the distribution of religious groups. Indonesia has the largest concentration of Muslims (around 87% subscribe to Islam), while Slovakia is 70% Christian. So one country is predominantly Hindu, the second Muslim and the third has a Christian religion and culture. There are, however, notable differences between

the three countries in terms of the religious faith and religious cultural traditions in education and in the way that faith is practiced within ECEC institutions.

Here we make no attempt to analyze the differences in how education is understood in the three religions. They almost certainly differ in their basic cultural models of human relations, their cultural, social and political hierarchies and in their personal, interpersonal and transcendental value frames. Instead, we shall simply note that whatever the religious or spiritual dimension of life, experience tells us that many Europeans are surprised by the depth and intensity of the religious influence on Asian countries and find it hard to engage with and understand it.

We shall compare Indonesian and Slovak education culture on the basis of our own experiences and observations over time. Our first general point is that in Indonesia religious faith is highly visible in the public and private spheres, with adherence to religious rules evident in both spheres regardless of religious faith (Islam is understandably the most visible, not just because it is the majority faith but also because it has highly externalized customs and rituals: attire, the call to prayers, frequency of praying, strict dietary rules). In Slovakia (and European culture generally) religious faith is part of the private sphere and kept to a minimum in public life. The public sphere is non-religious.

In Indonesian schools and kindergartens, religious faith is an important part of and framework for socialization and education, regardless of who the education provider is. In the state curriculum, religion occupies an important and indeed central role, and religious faith is the cornerstone of identity formation and the principle on which each person's ethical and personal integrity is built upon. With several religions existing alongside one another in education, an ethos and feeling of tolerance and social cohesion is developed.

Slovakia's public education system is based on different principles. Religious faith only forms an integral part of education in church schools, and there are but a tiny minority of these. In public schools and kindergartens, religious education may be on offer, but only as an option (as a parental choice) and not as part of the state curriculum; it is provided by the church. The public education system is non-religious and religious faith is practiced in the private sphere. Religious education is not part of the state curriculums for ECEC, primary and secondary education. Instead time is set aside should there be any interest in religious

education.

If we concentrate on early and preschool education, the above applies to both Indonesia and Slovakia: Indonesian kindergartens are all integrated in some way with religious faith, which plays a central role in the children's socialization and ethical development. The only religious Slovak kindergartens are church kindergartens. Secular ethical and prosocial education is an integral part of the ECEC curriculum and is strongly represented within it. This secular tradition means that teachers feel no need to include religious content in their teaching.

Nonetheless we should not forget that although Slovak ECEC is non-religious for the large part, it does contain elements of Christian culture, for European cultural is built on Christian foundations. At the very least, this is evident in important symbolic and ritual practices and content. This is particularly so in winter around Christmas time and in spring around Easter, when many of the educational activities in kindergartens are interwoven with events connecting seasonal changes with the religious traditions accompanying these Christian festivals.

We should also note that the separation of public education and religion in Slovakia (and in Europe generally) has deep roots stretching back to secular humanism and the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century, when this idea was first promoted. Moreover, in postcommunist countries, public education systems are secular, in part because atheism was a key principle under communism and so religious education was largely (but not entirely) excluded. In that era not only did all teachers have to teach in accordance with atheism but they also had to conduct their lives in that spirit as well. In the culture of postcommunist countries, the belief that religion has no place in education is reinforced by this historical fact and experience.

Insofar as religious faith in Nepal is concerned, Hinduism is less externalized than is the case in Muslim cultures, and receives less curricular attention. As can be seen in the prayer at the beginning of this section, the spiritual and religious dimension of education is forever present in everyday school life and frames it to some degree. On the other hand, though, Hindu culture is more powerful. In schools owned or run by Christian organizations, for example, Christian education cannot be taught to pupils from Hindu families. The relationship to other religions in education is therefore strictly controlled. Religious life is more diluted in Nepalese schools.

However, if we want to examine the dee-

per relationship between Hinduism and education than the one that can be observed in schools, then we run up against the way education is distributed in Hindu culture. As is well-known Hindu culture is based on the caste system. And caste membership determines access to education. Although the caste system is not explicitly ideological, it is deeply rooted in the culture and in people's consciousness. In the geography of education we cannot simply consider the physical environment but have to look at other factors such as the ethnic structure of the population and hierarchical position in the caste system. Such factors may explain the anomaly in education access in one of the Nepalese provinces (Province 2): it has the most favorable physical geographical conditions for good access to education and yet has one of the lowest attendance rates.

The presence of religion in education in both Indonesia and Nepal means that, regardless of their status, the different religions co-exist, interact and even communicate with one another, and the relationships between them reflect and reproduce the power tensions of dominance and marginalization. This co-existence can be seen in the classroom as well as in everyday life. It is a *modus operandi* that in many ways acts as a kind of buffer against value conflicts, and teaches mutual tolerance. If we turn to the cultural homogeneity of Slovakia with its "privatized" religious faith, we see that cultural liberalism exists hypothetically only and we have no real idea whether it is in fact important to this homogenous culture.

CONCLUSION

Although ECEC and education generally exhibit strong signs of globalization, internationalization, international homogenization and deterritorialization, they are also strongly localized and rooted in regional traditions. Although it may seem as if the national political rhetoric is very similar across countries and that the national curriculums are based on similar concepts, the reality of education in fact differs from country to country.

We are not suggesting that education policy and education should be blocked from following a positive pathway according to supranational visions. Instead, we argue that the historical, geographical, economic and cultural specifics and country characteristics that shape education systems and patterns have to be taken into account. These differences determine how the education system can evolve, the way society operates, the values its education mediates and how these help

the local culture reproduce and retain its identity. By gaining a better knowledge of these patterns and how they operate in ECEC, we can foster the regional dimension while tackling the barriers preventing its further development.

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