

CHAPTER V: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF SLC EXAMINATIONS*

1. INTRODUCTION

The SLC examinations are important for the overall secondary school system in Nepal. As has been often noted, the form of the SLC examinations deeply influences what is taught to students in school. Not only does the substance of what is taught get determined by the SLC examinations but how that is taught is also influenced by the exam format of the SLC. In other words, the SLC examinations influence both the pedagogical exercise of the secondary schools and notions of what counts as knowledge for students in their mid-teens. As an all-Nepal phenomenon, SLC examinations also provide an important indicator to measure the comparative competence of secondary schools of various types located in different parts of the country. It is also an important measure of the investments made in the school education sector in Nepal.

The SLC examinations are an important life-cycle event for secondary school students as well. Without passing the current system of the SLC, students can not enter the world of higher education. This means success in the SLC examinations is crucial for students who intend to pursue higher studies to qualify for professions that depend on such qualifications. For all these reasons, the SLC examinations assume an importance in Nepali society that perhaps no other examinations do. As one researcher has put it, there “are few annual events in Nepal that generate as much public interest and media attention as the publication of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination results” (Bhatta 2004: 3).

As one can expect, the publication of the SLC results is followed by various types of analytical and cultural rituals every year. On the analytical side, education pundits, school administrators, journalists, and commentators in the media discuss many facets of the SLC results to highlight the performance of individual students and schools and make comparisons between the results of schools of various types and locations or the results of a single school over time. On the cultural front, public felicitations of SLC toppers are held in the form of media rituals and functions in different institutional, geographical, and cultural spaces. Individual schools hold functions to congratulate their students who have passed the SLC. Boys and girls who secure the highest marks in SLC examinations in the country are often interviewed by journalists about the secret of their success and their future plans. Toppers from individual schools and specific types of schools (Government-run public schools, private or boarding schools) are identified and more often than not felicitated in public functions. Such functions are also held for those who do well in the SLC amongst students in various geographic units (e.g., tols, wards, districts, zones, etc.) or ethnic groups (Gurungs, Tamangs, etc.) or caste groups (e.g., dalits). It is usual to see messages of congratulations for successful students being published as paid advertisements in newspapers.

* This chapter is based on the report ‘Public Perceptions of the School Leaving Certificate Examinations in Nepal: A study based on print media coverage’ prepared by Dr. Pratyoush Onta for the SLC Study team.

Success, however, is not all that is in the news every year when the SLC results get published. Unfortunately, a majority of SLC candidates fail in the examination. In the past decade (2050 BS – 2061 BS), the pass rate has varied between as little as about 31 percent to as high as about 49 percent (in 2055 BS). As revealed by the data in Table 1, while there has been a steady increase in the number of regular students who have appeared in the SLC examinations in the last five years (2057 BS – 2061 BS), there is no significant pattern in the pass rate percentage.¹² It stayed around 31 – 32 percent for three years (2057 BS - 2059 BS), jumped to over 46 percent in 2060 BS and decreased to about 39 percent in 2061 BS. Putting it another way, more than half of the regular students fail the SLC each year. This data of poor pass rate contains within itself alarming disparities across the subjects examined, school types (public or private), sex of candidates (boys and girls), districts, and regions. These disparities in the results of the SLC batch of 2060 BS have been analyzed extensively by Bhatta (2004).

Table 1. SLC Results of Regular Students

Year (B.S.)	Total Candidates	Pass Rate (%)
2056	205,539	45.72
2057	132,210	31.62
2058	152,334	31.22
2059	170,389	32.05
2060	175,418	46.18
2061	216,303	38.72

Source: Bhatta (2004: Table 4.1) and various newspapers whose

Since, on an average, more than fifty percent of the regular students who take the SLC have failed each year during the past decade, this data has been often used to highlight the colossal waste and failure of the secondary school system in Nepal. Educationists and policymakers are beginning to recognize that the impact of such high failure rates has been devastating not only in terms of educational investment but also in

large social and political terms. Indeed, some analysts have hinted that the large numbers of students who have attended secondary school but have failed the SLC might have swelled the ranks of the Maoist guerrillas in the ongoing conflict in Nepal (Thapa with Sijapati 2003: Ch 3).

Given the importance of the SLC examinations in Nepali society as discussed above, any reform effort that stands a chance for success will have to have the backing of a wide array of stakeholders. These would include educational policymakers, Government bureaucrats, school managers, teachers, students, and their families. To garner such support, it is important to find out how these various members of Nepali society perceive and interpret student performance in SLC, in particular, the high failure rates and the disparities amongst those who pass. That is the agenda of this study done as a part of the broader study on student performance in SLC examinations. It describes and analyzes the existing perceptions regarding the SLC examinations amongst the Nepali public based on evidence from the print media.

An understanding of the existing public perceptions regarding the SLC examinations will allow educational planners to suitably justify their reform agenda when the actual full-scale SLC examinations reform process gets underway. In other words, it will help them to see what aspects of the reform agenda will find easy support on the part of the public because they correspond with the public's perception of what is wrong and hence in need of reform in the

¹² The total number of SLC candidates for the year 2056 BS appears high because all repeat students from the two old SLC curricula with full marks 900 and 700 respectively were allowed to take that year's examinations as 'regular' students. This was done to facilitate the transition toward the new SLC curriculum with full marks 800.

SLC exam system. In addition, such a study will also help educational planners to identify those aspects of the reform agenda that will have to be ‘sold’ to the public through a social marketing exercise because they are not so commonsensical or obvious in the current set of perceptions held by the public with respect to the SLC examinations. Thus the study ‘Public Perceptions of SLC Examinations’ on which this chapter is based, both document and analyze the current state of perceptions and form the basis for a part of a properly executed reform process of the SLC examinations.

For details on the methodology, please refer to ‘Public Perceptions of the School Leaving Certificate Examinations in Nepal: A study based on print media coverage’

Sampling newspaper coverage

Newspapers in Nepal have been covering SLC examinations for a long time. However, for purposes of this study, it was decided that newspaper coverage of the last five years only would be studied for this research. Some reports and writings that appeared more than five years ago have been read to get a feel for what the print media had to say then, but that was done only for the benefit of the researcher and hence they are not part of the analysis presented here. Additionally, it was decided that newspapers published from Kathmandu (and hence assuming a claim for ‘national’ status) and those published from Pokhara would be included in this study. The selection of Pokhara-produced newspapers was done to allow us an opportunity to surpass whatever limitations the Kathmandu-newspapers might have regarding their ability to represent concerns from other parts of Nepal despite their reliance on their own reporters located in various parts of the country. In other words, Pokhara-based publications were selected to see if they would give us a different ‘feel’ or ‘texture’ of public perceptions regarding the SLC, one that was regionally grounded.

It was decided that since the print media’s coverage of the SLC is concentrated just before, during, and immediately after the annual execution of the SLC examinations, and similarly around the time of the publication of the results, it would make sense to restrict the search for appropriate texts around these two occasions. Hence first the dates of the SLC examinations were figured out. Then those newspapers covered in this study were read for a period of about two weeks prior to the examinations, during the examinations (which usually last for about 10 days), and a week after the examinations are over. This meant that about a month’s newspaper texts were read around the time of examinations. Similarly, about a month’s daily newspapers were read around the time of the publication of the results. The dates of the newspapers studied for this research are given in Box 1.

For budgetary and managerial reasons, not all newspapers could be read to prepare the archive for this research. Hence it was decided that only daily newspapers would be studied for the five year period. This decision was influenced by the fact that in the recent past, daily newspapers have come to have the largest reach amongst print media products in Nepal.¹³ Seven Nepali language newspapers were selected amongst those published from Kathmandu (*Kantipur*, *Gorkhapatra*, *Nepal Samacharpatra*, *Spacetime Dainik*, *Rajdhani*, *Annapurna Post*, and *Himalayan Times*). Three amongst those published from Pokhara (*Janamat*, *Hotline*, *Pokharapatra*) were included in the research archive. A fourth Pokhara daily, *Adarsha Samaj*, was also researched. However, only three reports related to SLC were found and hence this newspaper has been dropped for the

¹³ For more on the daily newspapers, see Adhikari (2000).

purpose of this study. Articles from some weekly newspapers and from some magazines have been looked at but they have not been studied systematically for this research. English language newspapers were not studied as they have a limited reach in Nepal.

Box 1. Names and Dates of Newspapers Studied for this Research

<p>Kathmandu-published</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Spacetime Dainik2. Annapurna Post3. Himalayan Times4. Rajdhani5. Nepal Samacharpatra6. Kantipur7. Gorkhapatra <p>Dates covered in the research archive for Kathmandu newspapers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. 1 to 31 Asar 2057 BS2. 15 Chait 2057 BS to 15 Baisakh 2058 BS3. 15 Asar to 15 Saun 2058 BS4. 5 Chait 2058 BS to 5 Baisakh 2059 BS5. 20 Jeth to 20 Asar 2059 BS6. 1 to 30 Chait 2059 BS7. 15 Jeth to 15 Asar 2060 BS8. 1 to 30 Chait 2060 BS9. 15 Jeth to 15 Asar 2061 BS10. 1 to 31 Chait 2061 BS <p>Exceptional notes on dates covered for Kathmandu newspapers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. For Spacetime Dainik, the archive started from 15 Chait 2057 BS and does not include Chait 2061 BS by which time the paper had ceased publication.2. For Rajdhani, the archive started from 15 Asar 2058 BS as the paper was not in existence before Jeth 2058 BS3. For Annapurna Post, the archive started from 1 Chait 2059 BS as the paper was not in existence during the prior period covered by this research4. For Himalaya Times, the archive did not include Chait 2061 BS as copies of the newspaper for that month were not available at the CSRD library. <p>Pokhara-published</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Janamat2. Hotline3. Pokharapatra

2. COVERAGE IN KATHMANDU-BASED NEWSPAPERS

This section is organized according to the three genres of contents: editorial, op-ed article, and reporting. A reading of the research archive prepared from the newspapers published from Kathmandu suggested that analyzing its contents in this order of genres was most useful in terms of the extraction of perceptions, arguments, analysis, and suggestions. This order of analysis would also obviate the need for useless reproduction here of repetitions in the views, arguments, etc. In the sub-section dealing with reports, the items are discussed thematically whereas the other two sections are organized by paper and in a chronological manner.

Editorial

Each of the newspapers studied has published editorials on the SLC (see Table 2 for details). They are discussed by paper in a chronological order.

Table 2. Number of Editorials in the Research Archive

No.	Name of newspaper	No. of editorials
1	Spacetime Dainik	3
2	Annapurna Post	6
3	Himalayan Times	5
4	Rajdhani	3
5	Nepal Samacharpatra	10
6	Kantipur	5
7	Gorkhapatra	9

Spacetime Dainik: Three editorials from this paper are to be found in the research archive. The first two, published on 11/12/2058 (24 March 2002) and 19/12/2058 (1 April 2002,) dealt with the *bandh* call by the Maoists that coincided with the beginning of the SLC exam from 20/12/2058 (2 April 2002). In both editorials (especially in the first one), the Maoists were taken to task for adding

pressure on examinees were preparing to take the SLC. In the first of these SLC is said to influence the lives of students in a significant manner. It not only measures the ten to twelve years of study of students, the editorial added, it also marks the entrance to college education. If the examinations are derailed, the editorial warned, the entire educational environment in the country would face a series blow adding that if the intention of the Maoists in calling for the *bandh* is to attract the students to their cause, it is unlikely to happen. The editorial finally argued that if the Maoists feel any responsibility toward the nation, they should immediately revoke their call and provide mental relief to the students and their guardians.

On the second editorial published a day before the examinations were scheduled to begin, *Spacetime Dainik* lamented that by continuing the situation whereby students and guardians could not be sure that the examinations could be conducted in a routine manner, an environment of extreme callousness had been created. The editorial blamed the Maoists for this and called upon them to revoke the *bandh* to prove that they were still sensitive to the concerns of the people. However, it also held the Government responsible for making the situation worse by failing to determine the exam centers on time and make concomitant arrangements. It then highlighted how important the SLC was in the lives of the examinees and stressed that the last minute transferal of exam centers from previously announced locations for security reasons had brought great hardship on the examinees in terms of finding accommodation.

The third editorial published on 3/3/2060 (17 June 2003), after the SLC results were announced and entitled "Total Change in Education Necessary" began by noting that since less than a third of the students had passed the SLC, the results had once again been disappointing. For those who fail these examinations, the editorial added, it was a waste of more than ten years of their hard work and the investment made on them and is a matter of serious concern to the entire nation. It then noted that the Education System adopted by the country in 2028 BS, under state control, had failed to produce results and should have been reformed immediately. Instead, for more than three decades, it had been continued with some patchy reforms here and there. This unacknowledged mistake of the state had resulted in destroying the lives of hundreds of thousands of students and in the wastage of state investments in the billions, argued the editorial, which also emphasized that the pass result of public schools (about 20%) was even more disappointing. There were many such schools in which not a single student had passed the SLC whereas many others had a poor pass percentages, it added, stating further it was already late for the civil society to ask the Government why public schools supported by the state with investments in the billions (for teacher training, salary and pensions) were in such dismal state.

Reminding that even in the case of those who pass the SLC, apart from going for higher education, there aren't too many other options as the student would not have learnt any livelihood skills or knowledge, it argued that the state needed to change the present education system in its entirety.

Annapurna Post: In the research archive, there are six editorials from this newspaper, two each for the years 2003, 2004, and 2005. The first editorial was published on 07/12/2059 (21 March 2003) which fell during the period of declared 'truce' in the war between the state and Maoist forces. Despite the truce, the exam centers had been concentrated in district headquarters as in the previous year. This editorial criticized the continuation of this arrangement given the fact that it necessitated extra travel and expense burden on the examinees and their families arguing that expansion in the number of exam centers would make them more accessible to students and asked if the state didn't have the capacity to provide security. It also made the suggestion that as long as students were being forced to come to the district headquarters to take the examinations, social institutions and civil society organizations could do a lot to look after the logistical needs of the students at minimum costs.

The second editorial was published on 19/12/2059 (2 April 2003). The SLC examinations for that year were ongoing and the news regarding irregularities in Bara district provided the context for this editorial. Stating that three bundles of 'chits' were found in an exam centre in Bara district and two headmasters of schools were expelled from an exam centre trying to help for students with 'chits' it goes on to argue that such cheating goes on in many exam centres each year. Given that the SLC is the culmination of the students' first phase of education in life, the editorial continued, those who succeed in SLC by cheating can not be expected to be honest during the rest of their lives. It then went on to speculate why there is so much cheating. If failures mean end of Government subsidy to schools, for families it implies additional mental pressure and economic burden and for girls the inability to get married reasons that contribute toward an environment of cheating, the editorial suggested stressing that the examinations need to be conducted with a stringent level of invigilation and those caught cheating needed to be penalized. However, it also argued that it was important to monitor and control both the teaching and learning process in schools and the exam system. Pointing towards the stark disparity in pass rates of the private and rural public schools, it emphasized that an end to irregularities in the SLC was only possible through social action and educational discipline.

The third editorial published in the *Annapurna Post* (13/12/2060; 26 March 2004) backed the call to make that year's SLC exam period violence free. It called for a truce in fighting between the Maoists and the Government forces during the exam period. It reiterated the saying that the SLC is an 'iron gate' for completing school education and for entry into higher education. Failure in the SLC represents one kind of wastage but the wastage that would result if the examinations can not be held would be something different, argued the editorial. The mental disappointment of the examinees, should this happen, can not be compensated, it added.

The fourth editorial published in the *Annapurna Post* (32/2/2061; 14 June 2004) was written in the wake of the publication of SLC results for that year. While noting that the regular pass rate of 46.18% is better than in the past, the editorial mentioned that more than two hundred thousand students failed in total (regular plus repeat students), noting that such a huge figure was connected to the deteriorated educational environment and political stalemate. The editorial also noted the wide gulf between the pass record of private and public schools that the Government had failed to fill in emphasizing that the problem SLC failures has become a social problem with the Government bereft of any thought regarding how they could be provided with

an opportunity for work or learn alternate skills. It called on the Government to work on reforms in the education system.

The fifth editorial published in the *Annapurna Post* (12/12/2061; 25 March 2005) again highlighted the difficulties of the students during the course of the exam period brought up by the ongoing conflict. When the OCE decided to locate the exam centers in district headquarters for security reasons, students from elsewhere faced logistical problems, the decision of plight worsened by the hoteliers and restaurants in district headquarters to like up the service cost. The editorial condemned such tendency calling on everyone ensure that the examinees get to take their examinations in a peaceful and secure manner and reminding that it was the right of the students.

In its sixth (and the last in the research archive) editorial, the *Annapurna Post* (17/12/2061 or 30 March 2005) drew the readers' attention to the growing scam businesses that charged large amounts from students by promising them a pass result in the SLC. It noted that some schools and coaching centres were found to engage in such activity and criticized the Government for its inability to monitor such institutions. It also commented on the lack of alacrity on the part of the guardians who parted with large sums on false promises made to their wards by fake institutions. The editorial called for stringent punishment to those who were engaged in such scams.

Himalayan Times: Five editorials published in this newspaper are included in the research archive. They were published, respectively, after the SLC results were made public for the five batches between 2056 BS and 2060 BS. The first editorial (19/3/2057; 3 July 2000) makes the observation that SLC is considered to be an important milestone in the lives of those seeking education and that it is only after passing it that students get a chance to specialize on subjects of their interests. It notes that only 45.72 percent of the regular students passed the SLC that year before going on to criticize the decision of the OCE not to publish the names of the top ten students. The logic given by the OCE for this decision – that it would generate healthy competition between schools, that teaching would be focused on the intellectual development of students and not be exam-oriented, and that graders would have the incentive to mark copies in a healthy manner – was found wanting, claimed the editorial. Since the present age is one of competition, naming the top ten students produces an intense competitive spirit amongst students which is positive, said the editorial. The OCE's decision to publish only the names of the top male and female student is an effort to keep itself out of controversy, added the editorial.

The second editorial was published on 2/4/2058 (17 July 2001). The low pass rate of regular students, 31.62 percent, was over 14 percentage points less than in the previous year was an indication of the measures adopted by the OCE to reduce irregularities in the examinations and some of the other measures it had exercised (such as development-region-specific exam papers, parallel test papers, etc.). However, the editorial stressed that these praiseworthy efforts to reform examinations are not the only reasons behind the dismal pass rate. All related parties are equally responsible claim the editorial. The lack of stable and permanent educational policy, extreme politicization (of the field of education), unqualified and incompetent teaching force, lack of physical infrastructure, the unequal status between private and public schools, etc, were the reasons identified in the editorial for the deteriorating educational status. It added that, as a result of an unclear educational policy, two types of educated workforce were being produced by the two types of schools, leading to the potential crisis of class inequality.

Published on 4/3/2059 (18 June 2002), the third editorial noted that a little over 31 percent of the regular students passed the SLC that year emphasizing that the massive failure rate is a

blotch in our school educational system and deserves scrutiny. It stated that all the aspects of our school education responsible should be investigated. School textbooks, exam questions, and teaching and learning should be analyzed and discussion should be started on who is responsible – students or their teachers? Despite the Government spending large amounts of money on them, the results of the public schools are mostly disappointing, stated the editorial, where quality teaching and learning are absent. Politicization of schools and teachers being made victims of Maoist violence have also contributed to the disarray in our educational sector, added the editorial an environment, where the dismal result could be expected. In calling for an end to this state of affairs in the educational sector, the editorial called for the appointment of qualified and capable teachers in schools adding that schools are not locations for doing politics and should not be targets of destruction and violence.

Published on 2/3/2060 (16 June 2003), the fourth editorial reiterates the image of SLC as an ‘iron gate’, lamented the fact that only 32 percent of the students passed SLC and noted that only about 25 percent of those who passed came from public schools, a clear indication that proper teaching was not happening at the public schools. The editorial added that those who have become school teachers by using ‘source force’ and only sign in their presence but spend their time in school talking about politics contributed toward the bad pass statistics and that in addition to the disparities noticed between public and private schools, the results also showed the differences between urban and rural areas in their pass rates. The rate for schools in the rural areas is very disappointing, it added and said that the situation in which the poor and the disenfranchised constituted a larger part of those failing the SLC was a matter of worry adding that the lack of qualified, competent, and experienced teachers in schools was responsible for the poor results.

The fifth editorial (32/2/2061; 14 June 2004) noted that 46.18 percent of the students passed the SLC that year. Since this rate is higher than in the immediate past years, it wondered if the higher pass rate was due to a Government policy to pass as many students as possible. If this is so, the editorial argued that it could be a suicidal policy to the educational sector.

Rajdhani: There are only three editorials from this newspaper in the research archive. The first one was published on 18/12/2058 (31 March 2002), two days before the SLC and the Maoist-called *bandh* were to start. Like other editorials discussed above, this one too condemned the Maoists for calling the *bandh* that coincided with the execution of the SLC examinations and argued that since the examinations should be conducted in a secure manner and the examinees and their guardians should not be burdened with insecurity, uncertainty, and mental pressure, the Government should even consider postponing the examinations. The second editorial (1/3/2060; 15 June 2003) discussed the SLC results for that year. Like other editorials published in newspapers discussed above, this one used the large number of students who failed the SLC that year to talk about the dark educational future of the country. Using the low pass rate of students from public schools as its evidence, it stated that the educational status of such schools where almost 80 percent of the students studied was in bad shape. Most of these students, it added, came from the poor class. This two-class producing educational disparity between private and public schools was leading to a Nepal where the country was led by graduates from the private schools and public school attendees were filling the ranks of the insurgents, argued the editorial, adding that this disparity has to be abolished which calls from a total reform of the educational and physical environment of the public schools.

The third editorial, published on 6/12/2060 (19 March 2004), about a week before the SLC examinations for that year were to start, took up the difficulties faced by students as its main

subject and given that the test centres had been fixed in district headquarters for security reasons, discussed the news that Maoists were barring the examinees from one particular school from traveling to the district headquarters in Rukum and called on the Government to provide security cover to bring students from elsewhere to district headquarters. Discussing how delay in fixing exam centres in the eastern district of Udaypur had produced an environment of confusion and uncertainty to examinees who had congregated with their guardians in the district headquarters Gaighat, it cautioned about the consequent impact on students' performance, adding that in Dhanusa district in southeastern Nepal, centering most of the examination sites in private school raised serious doubts about the integrity of examinations, it added. Given the already poor educational standard of public schools, it speculated that the disparity between the two types of schools might increase and called for an investigation of the exam selection process in Dhanusa.

Nepal Samacharpatra: There are ten editorials from this paper in the research archive. The first uses the context of publication of SLC results to make a mixed commentary on the loss of confidence in the education sector (23/3/2057). The second, published on 9/12/2058 (22 March 2002), commented about the difficulties faced by students who were about to take the SLC that year. The reduction in the number of exam centres due to security reasons and the Maoist call for a *bandh* to coincide with the SLC examinations (both discussed in earlier editorials) formed the basis of the main commentary which ended by calling for a retraction of the *bandh* call. The third editorial was published on 3/3/2059 (17 June 2002) after the SLC results were made public. Noting that only 31.22 percent of the students passed SLC that year, the editorial argued that the colossal failure rate of nearly 70 percent reflected the poor quality of our teaching and educational system. This warranted a serious re-evaluation of the entire educational system and its quality on the part of the Government, argued the editorial. Published on 19/12/2059 (2 April 2003) while the SLC examinations for that year were ongoing, the fourth editorial noted that despite the efforts of the OCE to manage SLC examinations in a proper manner, news about irregularities from various parts of the country has suggested that its capabilities needs further enhancement and recommended punishment for those found responsible for irregularities during the course of the examinations.

The fifth editorial was published on 2/3/2060 (16 June 2003) after the SLC results were published. Citing that a total of over 172,000 regular and repeat students failed the exam and among those who passed, only 35 percent were from public schools, the editorial lamented both the waste of investments on education and the poor state of public education. The editorial stated that since most of the students have failed in math, science, and English, the teaching of those subjects was clearly not effective. In addition, it stated that in public schools, there is not only a lack of physical facilities and resources, but also of subject teachers and that students have been affected by the inability of the Government to provide the necessary teachers in public schools, the frequent calls for strikes and *bandhs* by the political parties, and the Maoist insurgency. Calling upon the Government to reform the defects in school education as pointed out by education experts, it added that these have to do with issues related to the curriculum and the exam system and asked the Government to find the inadequacies in school education and revise the educational policy accordingly. The massive failure rate in public schools is an indication of the gap between the teaching level in such schools and the level assumed by the exam questions, the editorial went on to say and suggested that considering the large number of students who fail the SLC every year, the state should provide training and special education for them.

The sixth editorial was published on 12/12/2060 (25 March 2004), a day before the SLC examinations were to start that year. Since the Maoists had made a major attack on Beni, the district headquarters of Myangdi only a few days earlier, the editorial noted that the countdown to the examinations was marred by worries regarding security of the examinees and rumors that the examinations might be postponed in districts most affected by the conflict. It called upon all the warring parties in the country to facilitate the execution of the SLC examinations. The seventh editorial, which was published on 31/2/2061 (13 June 2004), commented on how the SLC results publication process (with the OCE giving the responsibility to *Gorkhapatra* for printed publication with other arrangements for viewing in the Internet) was not student-friendly and argued that given the efficiency demonstrated by daily newspapers published by the private sector, the results should also be published in them.

The eighth editorial, published on the following day (32/2/2061; 14 June 2004), noted that despite a 14 percent increase, the 46.18 percent pass rate meant that almost 54 percent of the examinees failed and that only 24 percent of the examinees from public schools had passed that year. The editorial identified the conflict and conditions generated by it as being responsible. In addition, the lack of qualified teachers, physical facilities, and a learning environment, were also identified as factors. Given the strikes in institutions of higher education, the editorial noted that some parents were thinking of sending their children (who had passed the SLC) abroad for higher education. Since that would mean the transfer of national wealth to foreign countries, the editorial stressed that the concerned authorities should pay attention to this to present the outflow.

The ninth editorial published on 12/12/2061 (25 March 2005), two days before the beginning of the SLC examinations, argued that it was the right of the students to appear in the SLC in an environment without fear and without having to endure mental and physical stress. It cited the call by the UNDP office in Kathmandu to both the warring parties not to obstruct the exam and examinees in any way. The tenth and last editorial, published three days later (15/12/2061; 28 March 2005) while the SLC examinations were ongoing, focused on the scams that had prevented some 500 plus students from appearing in the examinations, called upon the Government to punish the various tuition centers and institutes involved and upon students and their guardians to be more alert about registering for the examinations properly.

Kantipur. There are only five editorials from this paper in the research archive. The first was a special editorial published on the front page on 17/12/2058 (30/3/2002) denouncing the Maoist call for a *bandh* that coincided with the SLC that was to start three days later. Entitled “Playing with the future of the students or ‘revolutionary entertainment?’” the editorial described the Maoist call as a “forward step in the Taliban-like highway against education, stating it was the main responsibility of the state to tame Maoist violence and terror and make citizens feel secure. Under no condition should the students be made victims of the Maoists, added the editorial, suggesting that the Government consider postponing the exam by a week to guarantee the safety of the students.

The second editorial published on 3/3/2059 (17 June 2002) commented on the SLC results for the batch of 2058 BS Noting that pass rate of 31.22 percent means that more than 104,000 regular students had failed the SLC that year, the editorial stressed that although the direct impact of this failure is on the students, the indirect impact is on the future of the whole nation. The failure is not only that of the students who could not succeed in the SLC but also that of their teachers and the whole educational system, added the editorial, suggesting the entire educational system needed reforms. Commenting on the disparities in the results between

students from rural and urban areas and between private and public schools, it called for an end to the situation where the financial status of the parents determines the kind of education that their children can afford, arguing that the investments made by the state on education must become visible in the good educational performance of the students.

In the third editorial published on 2/3/2060 (16 June 2003), SLC results for that year were analyzed. Not surprisingly, the nearly 70 percent students who failed became the basis for a series of serious questions: Who are these students and where are they from? Were they students in private or public schools? What is the economic and social status of their guardians? While acknowledging that answering to these questions was not that easy, the editorial stresses that unless there is improvement in the level of educational performance, the disparity in quality between private and public schools is reduced, and the issue regarding access to quality education for children of parents of low economic and social status is tackled at the policy level education will continue to be the dividing line between two classes of Nepalese.

The editorial asked some additional questions. When almost 70 percent of the students fail the SLC, whose failure is it? It suggested that in addition to the students, it is also the failure of their teachers, guardians, and the educational policy of the country and that the young who are deprived of education and opportunity might consider violence as the means through which the foundations of social equality can be laid. The SLC results throw up two challenges to the Government, society and planners, argued the editorial. For those who have passed, the challenge is to ensure the opportunities for higher education that meets their qualification and aptitude. For those who have failed, the challenge is to provide capable teachers and create an environment for learning. It is a priority for the Government to make such a decision at the policy level and create the institutional framework to realize it. Educational administrative offices and the guardians should make the schools responsible in some way for the large number of failed students. The editorial suggested that the OCE and the Education Department should commission a team of experts to study the determinants of the SLC results and ask the team to come up with policy level suggestions for reform of the system.

The fourth editorial, published on 31/2/2061 (13 June 2004) after the SLC results for that year were made public took note of the 14% increase in the pass rate over the previous year mentioning that the OCE had cited gap days in the exam schedule, training in copy marking, and the system of 'grace' marks as being responsible for this positive change. However, the editorial in a skeptical vein asked if the higher pass rate indicated an improvement in the learning and teaching process or some procedural improvements. It cited reasons to doubt that there has been an improvement in the pedagogical process suggesting that if the higher pass rate is the result of a mindset bent on doing 'reforms for reforms sake', it would not be long-lasting.

The fifth and last editorial was published on 12/2/2061 (25 March 2005), two days before the SLC examinations were to begin. It argued that students have the right to appear in the examinations without having to worry about the additional tensions imposed upon them by the condition of conflict in Nepal. The editorial stated that the confinement of the exam centers to the district headquarters for security reasons had imposed additional logistic and economic burden on students who have to travel to the district headquarters from elsewhere. To ease their logistical burden, the editorial argues that local hotels, social workers, non-governmental organizations, and citizens in district headquarters can play an active role. These entities can facilitate the lodging and food needs of the students while they prepare for and take the examinations, added the editorial.

Gorkhapatra: In the research archive, there are nine editorials from this newspaper. The first two dealt with the Maoist *bandh* that coincided with the SLC in April 2002. The first (published on 14/12/2058; 27 March 2002) came down strongly on the Maoists and urged them to revoke the call for a *bandh* and the state to do everything to ensure that each examinee could take the examinations without fear. The second editorial, published two days before the SLC examinations started (on 18/12/2058; 31 March 2002), the Maoists again criticized severely. However, the editorial also listed various types of mobilization initiated by the state, political parties, civil society, transporters, and parents to make sure that SLC examinations are conducted without obstruction.

The third editorial, published after the results of the SLC were out in mid-June 2002 (3/3/2059; 17 June 2002) noted that despite the threats from the Maoists, the SLC examinations had been conducted and results published as also that the pass rate of about 31 percent is ‘welcome’ given the extenuating circumstances in which the examinations were held. It congratulated the OCE for bringing out the results within 65 days. However, the editorial reminded that due to the lack of qualified teachers serving in remote parts of the country and due to the poverty of those areas, there is regional disparity in the SLC results. It is necessary to execute a plan to reduce this disparity, added the editorial. In addition, the reasons for the large number of failures (apart from the Maoist terror) needed to be investigated and analyzed and an appropriate and effective plan needed to be implemented, stressed the editorial.

The fourth editorial, published on the first day of the SLC examinations for the next batch of students (16/12/2059; 30 March 2003), hoped that given that the SLC examinations are defined as an ‘iron gate’ for the students, the examinations could be conducted in a peaceful manner and then discussed the OCE’s plans to standardize the marking of the exam answer copies hoping that the mistakes made by it in the past would not be repeated. Published after the SLC results were made public in mid-June 2003 (1/3/2060; 15 June 2003), the fifth editorial given that the pass rate was only about 32 percent, the reasons for the large numbers of students who failed the SLC needed to be identified and appropriate action needed to be taken. All aspects of the SLC including its curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogical system needed to be analyzed and discussed, the editorial added. It recognized that most failing students could not pass the English and Math examinations adding that although there have been some efforts to enhance the capacities of teachers in these subjects; these efforts had not made much of a difference. It added that there is hardly a debate regarding the need to reform the SLC exam system mentioning that devolution of the SLC exam system to the district or regional level is one idea doing the rounds.

The sixth editorial, published on 13/12/2060 (26 March 2004), the first day of the SLC examinations of that year, hoped for a peaceful and routine conduct of the examinations given that they were being held days after the Maoist attack on Beni which had necessitated a replacement of the exam question set for the entire Western development region. The editorial called for severe punishment of those found engaged in irregularities during the examinations. It praised the OCE’s decision to grant ‘distinction’ status to those students who secured over 80 percent marks in average adding that this would further inspire the good students. The seventh editorial was published after the results were out (on 31/2/2061; 13 June 2004). In trying to explain why over 46 percent students had passed the SLC that year (as opposed to about 32 percent in the previous two years), the editorial cited gap days in the exam schedule as one reason mentioned by others. Nevertheless it added that talk about the need to reform SLC curriculum, textbooks, exam system, and teaching process was to be expected. It further added

that the efforts to reform school level education and the examination system must be continuous.

The eighth editorial highlighted one Governmental effort to reduce the disparity in SLC results between public and private schools (10/3/2061; 24 June 2004). It discussed a Government initiative to grant 400,000 rupees to secondary schools in rural areas (with at least 50 examinees) which achieve over a 50 percent pass rate in SLC. The editorial added that this initiative is contributing positively to increase the educational quality of public schools in rural areas via mutual competition. The ninth and final editorial was published on the day when the SLC examinations started for the year 2005 (14/12/2061 or 27 March 2005). It reminded the readers why the SLC is an important exam in our society. SLC is the gate that opens up higher education; it is the exam that needs to be passed by those seeking employment in the Government sector, and it is an item of social prestige for those who have passed it. The editorial added that given the investments families make on the students, the examinations are also important from an economic point of view. Given that those who are appearing for the examinations this year would be the future leaders of the country, the editorial argued that they should be allowed to take the examinations without any obstacles. It reassured readers that the Government has taken care of the security needs and the OCE has done its job to properly manage the examinations.

Conclusion

In section two of this report it was mentioned that editorials are the only texts where the concerned newspapers give their readers their views, analysis, and bear on the theme of SLC. In other words, editorials are textual windows through which we can understand the perceptions of professional journalists about SLC. Since professional journalists constitute an important sub-set of the public, the significance of studying these editorials for this report is obvious. To conclude this sub-section, we can say that based on a reading of the editorials published in the big dailies of Kathmandu, the following themes about the SLC seem important in the views of the journalists.

Journalists writing the editorials agree that the SLC is an important event in the lives of students. Hence they portray SLC as an 'iron gate' to higher education and further opportunities in the job market. They agree that passing SLC provides social prestige to students. However, they also emphasize the need to reorient the SLC curriculum to make it more oriented toward livelihood skills. They have also commented at length about the exam execution process. In particular, they have criticized the irregularities in the form of cheating and violations of exam ethics by students and invigilators. They have also come down forcefully against scam businesses that promise to 'pass' the students in SLC examinations against a fat fee. These irregularities violate the integrity of the SLC exam and hence the journalists suggest that those caught doing wrong should be penalized. They have also argued that the ongoing conflict has created additional pressure on students in the last five years. The *bandhs* called by the Maoists have created an atmosphere of uncertainty for all involved in the exam process. The OCE's decision to limit exam centers in district headquarters for security reasons has added new burdens on students regarding travel to the centers and the finding of temporary housing, food, logistics, etc. The journalists have guessed that these worries have had some impact on the performance of the students.

The journalists have commented aplenty on the high failure rate of SLC and have portrayed this failure as a massive waste of both state and private investments in education. The failure in the SLC has been held responsible for destroying the lives of hundreds of thousands of Nepali

students. They have listed and commented upon some of the factors behind the high failure rate including poor educational environment in many public schools, unstable educational policy, extreme politicization of teachers and management, and conflict-induced closures of schools. They have pointed at the lack of physical resources and competent teachers, especially in subjects such as math, science, and English. They have also hinted at inadequacies in school textbooks, exam questions, and the pedagogical system as being responsible for the dismal results.

While analyzing SLC results, journalists have expressed their worries about many disparities contained therein. In particular, the huge difference in the pass rate of public and private schools and between schools in the rural and urban areas has been emphasized. They have also pointed out the absolutely poor results of many public schools where all SLC candidates have tended to fail. They are worried that since students from the relatively poor families are studying in public schools in rural Nepal and these schools in general tend to have a poor pass rate, the current SLC set up is contributing toward the creation of a education-based two-class Nepali society. This fact, they worry, potentially fuels the current conflict and could be the source of yet another conflict in Nepali society in the future.

The journalists writing the editorials agree that the SLC exam system has to be drastically reformed. One outcome of the reform has to be reflected in a much better pass rate whereas another would be reflected in the ability of the SLC curriculum to provide livelihood earning skills to both those who pass and fail the examinations. They recognize the many reform efforts being executed by the OCE, especially in the exam management aspects, but suggest that these are inadequate. Some have suggested the devolution of the management of the SLC exam to the district or regional level.

Op-Ed Article

Each of the newspapers studied have published op-ed articles related to SLC (see Table 3). They are discussed by paper in a chronological order.

Table 3. Number of Op-Ed Articles in the Research Archive

No.	Name of newspaper	No. of op-ed articles
1	Spacetime Dainik	6
2	Annapurna Post	3
3	Himalaya Times	4
4	Rajdhani	4
5	Nepal Samacharpatra	2
6	Kantipur	15
7	Gorkhapatra	18

Spacetime Dainik: There were six opinion pieces from this newspaper in the research archive. One of them was a polemical piece asking Maoist leaders if they had themselves given their SLC examinations within the security cordon of the army. This article was published to challenge the Maoist call for a *bandh* that coincided with the SLC in April 2002. A second piece was an advisory column on how to prepare for SLC examinations and how to

stay calm while the exam was in progress. Since these two pieces are not very relevant to this analysis, they are not discussed. The four pieces discussed here include Khanal (2002), KC (2002), P. Gautam (2003), and Rai (2003).

All the four authors discuss a host of variables that influence student performance in the SLC. While reading them, one gets the feeling that the authors hardly feel the need to distinguish specific aspects of the issue for analysis. Instead, they are more likely to mention many factors that, in their minds, account for the poor performance of most students in the SLC. Khanal

(2002) states that there is inconsistency between the objectives of the SLC curriculum and the SLC examination. A majority of those who fail the SLC study in schools in rural Nepal. In such schools, he adds, there is a lack of qualified teachers and physical infrastructure. He also mentions that the incidence of irregularities during the examinations is on the rise and the conflict in the country has meant that the students have taken the examinations in an atmosphere of fear. The SLC question papers have contained errors. The selection of answer copy markers is done on the basis of personal connections and political loyalties instead of being based on the educational qualification, capability, and experience of the examiners. In terms of suggestions to reform the system, he proposes that the management of SLC must be decentralized at the regional level. Students who fail should not have to give the examinations of the subjects they have passed. The technical processing of the transcripts must be made flawless, adds Khanal.

Analyzing the SLC results for 2058 BS (pass rate 31.22%), K.C. (2002) suggests that the state of emergency, reduction in exam centers and the conduct of the examinations under tight security arrangements might have psychologically influenced the examinees. He argues that frequent strikes, absence of teachers from schools, and extreme politicization of education have damaged the quality of education imparted in schools resulting in poor student performance in SLC. According to K.C., to improve the quality of education, teachers will have to be given appropriate training and their professional appointment and promotions will have to be done based on qualification and capability. In addition, he adds that politicization of teachers must be curtailed by the creation of a single union interested in professional issues only.

Basing his analysis on the results of the SLC of 2059 BS, Pradeep Chandra Gautam (2003) states that the big failure rate and disparity between public and private schools are matters of concern. Most who fail are students from rural and remote areas and come from low economic class. This disparity is a serious case of injustice that generates inequality and a mass of unhappy young who want to revolt. Gautam argues that this kind of result has not been the concern of our politicians who might be internally happy for the fact that it generates hordes their followers. Gautam argues that the concerned offices and educationists should get together and identify the determinants and take concrete steps to improve the results. Thinking about the factors that have influenced the disappointing SLC results, he lists the following: yearly change in curriculum and the format of question papers, the adoption of the same evaluation criteria for students from schools with very difference resources, and a tough evaluation procedure at the SLC level only (compared to previous Grades in school). Other reasons he adds include the mechanism to test students just on the basis of a three-hour written exam, absence of a continuous evaluation scheme, and emphasis on rote memorization of theoretical things.

With respect to public schools in the rural and remote areas, Gautam mentions that classes are not held full time in such schools. Teachers of math, science, and English are hard to come by and when they are found, it is hard to retain them. The textbooks are not available on time. According to Gautam, the low investment of the state on public schools, temporary licences to operate them, politics interference, absence of a system of rewards and punishment, incompetent management committees, and the absence of a continuous and effective monitoring and supervision system are also responsible for the poor results as is the deteriorating security condition in rural Nepal. Gautam adds that given this condition, the transfer of public schools to local communities might be a ploy for the Government to abdicate its own responsibility. To improve the situation, Gautam says that in addition to the examination

system, HMG's educational policy and educational system along with the curriculum, textbooks and teaching system needs a reevaluation.

In his article, Purna Rai (2003) bases his analysis on the results of the 2059 BS SLC (pass rate 32.5 %). Apart from this low pass rate, Rai is also concerned about the fact that most of the failures come from among the students who attend the public schools. He puts the blame for this situation on the rampant commercialization of school education in the form of private/boarding schools and the Government's implicit support for this process. He charges that public schools have been neglected and hence they do not have adequate teachers and physical resources. He adds that textbooks do not reach students on time and there is no regular teaching. The students being graduated by the private schools are mostly going to go abroad and hence are not likely to be available 'manpower' for the country. To improve the situation, Rai argues that the investment state on education must increase with the Government in full control of the education sector. He suggests that if the children of high ranking Government officials were made to study compulsorily in public schools, the attention of these officials would go to such schools. Unless the situation improves, Rai suggests, the fees in private schools will increase and education will go beyond the reach of children from low income families.

Annapurna Post: There are three opinion pieces from this newspaper in the research archive. The first by Rajendra Bikram K.C. (2003) begins by discussing the SLC results for the 2059 B.S batch. The usual negative characteristics of the results are discussed: low pass percentage, disparity between results of private and public schools and more than 200 schools from which not a single student passed the SLC. When students from low and middle economic classes have limited access to higher education, K.C. argues, a revolution can be born in the society. The success of private schools is due to the commitment of the teachers toward their work, argues K.C. On the other hand, public schools suffer from politicization of teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and the present conflict, argues K.C. He states that Maoists have killed and maimed many teachers and more than 30,000 teacher posts are vacant in the public schools of the country. The changed curriculum is also a reason for the deteriorating educational quality, K.C. notes.

In the second opinion piece, Govinda Adhikari (2004) delineates the extra mental and physical burdens borne by the SLC examinees of 2004 due to the ongoing conflict. Since the students had to travel to the district headquarters to take the examinations, they were susceptible to harassment by armed forces of both of the warring sides. Once in the district headquarters, they faced many logistical problems. Adhikari argues that during the exam period, the state, society, and the families of students should try to create an appropriate environment for students. Moreover, he argues that Nepal's current educational system in which the examination retains maximum importance needs to be changed. An evaluation system based exclusively on the end-of-the-year examinations such as the SLC has many defects and alternatives to such a system need to be sought seriously, hints Adhikari.

The article by Bikas Kumar Tiwari (2004) deals with how the conflict has impacted the education sector in Nepal in very general terms. Tiwari repeats much of what others have said. Talking about SLC in particular, the only new argument he offers is related to the arrangement regarding grace marks and supplementary tests. He argues that no matter how poor SLC pass performance might be, to give grace marks to students so that they can pass SLC or give them the opportunity to reappear in tests of subjects they had failed, is to hatch a conspiracy against the weak students. This kind of arrangement, he suggests, will make such students even weaker and cannot be an alternative to educational development.

Himalayn Times: There are four articles from this newspaper in the research archive. The first by Yuvaraj Pandey (2002a) makes some interesting points regarding the massive failure rate of students in SLC. Pandey wonders if the SLC curriculum is more vast and comprehensive than what students of that age are able to grasp and understand. He wonders if the question papers are set in such a way that most students are unable to answer all the questions in the allotted time. Pandey also wonders how the difficulty level of different question sets given in the various regions of the country is equated. Given that such a thing can only be done through practical tests and research, he wonders if the SLC students from different parts of Nepal are being unfairly asked to answer questions of various difficulty levels. To get rid of this doubt, he advocates the use of a single question set throughout the country. Pandey also wonders if the SLC answer copies are being marked by teachers used to teaching at a higher level and hence would have expectations that would be different than those of teachers who only teach at the SLC level. He argues that these points regarding the curriculum, exam, and marking process need to be discussed because they influence student performance in the SLC.

Prakash Silwal (2003) discusses the recommendations made by the Secondary Education Action Plan regarding the SLC. It was this Plan that recommended organizational reform of the OCE, decentralization of exam management, and reform in the quality of SLC examinations. The use of region-specific question sets, use of alternate question sets in math and English even in a single exam centers, use of a special coding mechanism in answer copies, and reform in the marking process were some of the outcomes of this Plan. Silwal argues that the effect of these measures need to be discussed widely. He also asks if reforming from the top end (namely, the SLC) and not doing much in lower classes will give us the desired results.

In the third article, Giridhara Dahal (2003) begins with an analysis of SLC results for the 2059 BS batch (when the pass rate was 32.05%). He makes the usual points regarding the high failure rate and the disparity between private and public schools. However, he notes that teachers in the public schools are experienced and trained even as these schools lack physical resources. He remarks that the 'consciousness' of the guardians of students who study in rural and remote area schools is 'low'. The students have to spend more time in domestic and farming-related work than in school education. The management of these schools is not good which is in sharp contrast with the case of private schools which tend to have good management, argues Dahal. According to him, the fault for the high failure rates lies with everyone in the system. He argues that Nepal needs a good educational policy, one which teaches students practical and technical skills. He ends with a general recommendation to improve the SLC results. This can be done, according to Dahal, by making the education system scientific, public-oriented, and easily accessible to all.

In another article Yuvaraj Pandey (2003) argues that SLC examinations should not contain questions based on the curriculum of class nine and ten but should only be based on the textbooks of class ten. Secondly, he again argues against the use of multiple question sets in a single SLC exam without a priori practical testing of these questions adding that with respect to the results, there is no proof that the arrangement of multiple question sets has made any significant difference.

Rajdhani: There are four articles from this newspaper in the research archive. The first of them is by Rajendra Maharjan (2001a) who starts by discussing the results of 2057 BS SLC examinations. Given the colossal number of failed students, Maharjan asks if the steps taken then to reform the exam process in terms of alternate question papers in math and English, the arrangement of marking answer copies in centers identified by the OCE, coding and decoding of answer copies,

etc. actually contribute toward a crisis of confidence between the stakeholders rather than enhancing the quality of the SLC examinations. Maharjan states that SLC has functioned more as an ‘ambush’ to fail students and hence our thinking about reforms has to go beyond its procedural aspects. He asks how the SLC examinations are to be located with respect to the main objective of teaching and learning in our secondary schools: Are the examinations assisting the teaching-learning process or obstructing or are they sidelining the poor, disenfranchised, and rural students from the mainstream of society? Maharjan stresses that the time has come to examine our entire examination system to find out how student-friendly, impartial, and scientific it is.

In another article, Yuvaraj Pandey (2002 b) reiterates many themes related to the massive failure rate discussed by him and others giving ideas for discussion to raise the pass rate. Among the ones not discussed earlier, one is to reduce the number of subjects that SLC students have to study. He thinks the students should only be asked to study Nepali, English, math, and social studies as compulsory subjects and a fifth optional subject. Another idea he proposes is to reduce the pass mark from 32 to 30 or less. Alternatively, he suggests that a routine granting of grace marks of 5, 7, 10 could be adopted and says that there can be other ideas if Nepali society is really concerned about raising the pass rate of SLC students.

Paudel’s article (2003) was published after the SLC results for the 2059 B.S batch were made public. Although that was the context for his writing, most of it is concerned with school education in general. Details of some initiatives and data are provided but not directly related to SLC. Paudel adds little to our previous discussions about the SLC and among the suggestions he makes to improve the results, the only new one is his emphasis on how students should be made to practice answer writing to model SLC questions.

Ekaraj Bhattarai’s article (2004) was published after the SLC results for the batch of 2060 BS was made public. Since 46.18 percent of the regular students had passed, there had been a need to explain increase of about 14 percent in the pass rate. Official sources had attributed it to SLC exam schedule with gaps between certain examinations, reforms in answer marking process, training given to graders, and so forth. Despite the increase of the pass percentage, Bhattarai reminds the readers that huge number of students still failed the SLC. He stresses that the result of the public schools are still disappointing and gives many examples of districts with several schools where not a single student passed. To find out the reasons why so many fail SLC, Bhattarai argues that we have to find answers to many other related questions. One link he makes is to the practice in schools whereby low performing students are routinely promoted to higher Grades. Other links he suggests are related to issues regarding school management, teacher appointment process, commitment of school teachers, teacher-student ratio in schools, physical resources available in schools, etc. In order to provide quality education to all students, he suggests that the state should invest more in public schools and after making sure that such schools are properly managed by communities, private sector involvement in school education must be curtailed. This would also force the country’s leaders to pay attention to public schools which they do not have to do at the moment as their wards study in private schools, adds Bhattarai.

Nepal Samacharpatra: There are only two opinion articles published in this newspaper in the research archive, both by Suman Kattel. In the first one, Kattel (2003) argues that in the successful execution of any educational policy, management, teachers, students, and guardians have an equal role, suggesting that non-inclusion of all four of these parties in policy formation and reform programs related to secondary education in Nepal is responsible for the massive

failure of students. He adds that wrong selection of subjects, faulty question papers, and teaching methods are also responsible for lack of success. Providing further details, Kattel argues that making English and math – two subjects in which many students fail the SLC – compulsory in SLC is unnecessary. He also adds that the direct politicization of school education has contributed to a less than healthy educational environment and that many teachers in public schools lack self-confidence, knowledge of specific subjects, application in their work in comparison with their peers in private schools. To improve SLC results, he suggests that a result monitoring committee must be set up in the Ministry of Education which can analyze the SLC results each year and set specific targets for progress.

In the second article, Kattel (2004) argues that the fact that nearly three out of four students fail SLC each year is a clear indication of the full failure of our educational policy, that the main reason is the exam-oriented educational system, that teaching process is not effective and the curriculum is faulty in its theoretical emphasis. Hence, he says even though many subjects are included in the SLC, there is a dearth of experimental and practical teaching. Kattel argues that SLC exam has to be simplified by making all subjects optional. So that it will not be the big stumbling block it has become for many students. Just making English a non-compulsory subject would increase the pass rate by a significant margin, writes Kattel, stressing that the current effort to represent SLC as the ‘iron gate’ of our education system must be discontinued and should be rendered into just another school exam. It shouldn’t be the gate that stops many students from realizing their potential in life, he adds.

Kantipur: There are 15 articles from this newspaper in the research archive. While each of them mentions SLC, not all make it their main subject of discussion. Hence only the relevant ones are discussed here. Geeta Rana (2000) argues that since the tradition of making public the first 10 ranked students in the SLC has led to unhealthy competition between schools, the practice should be scrapped. Instead, she argues that the attention of the OCE should be focused on ensuring quality in each of the steps required for successful execution of the exam. Lamichhane (2001) makes various comments on the different initiatives taken by the OCE to improve SLC. These are related to the use of different sets of questions papers in the different regions of the country, alternate sets for math and English in the same exam center, coding and decoding of answer copies, etc. Since most of what he has to say has been discussed by others mentioned above, they will not be repeated here. However, he also makes other observations that are worthy of note. Lamichhane argues that although the full marks of the SLC were increased from 700 to 800 by adding a paper on health, population and environment, not enough time was given to train teachers on this new subject. In addition, the 20-mark oral exam included as part of the English test proved to be difficult for students studying in schools with teachers who were not trained to adequately prepare the students for this part of the test.

Maharjan (2001b) argues that our education system is organized around an examination procedure that promotes rote memorization adding that since examinations including SLC are result-oriented, they have become opportunities to regurgitate texts learnt by heart. Maharjan adds that these tests do not promote the critical and creative faculties of students and their present format suits the interests of those who run our very unequal society. Those who ask critical questions, those who can argue, and those who can analyze new problems are dangerous to the managers of the status quo who will only permit the OCE to do small reforms in the exam system that do not challenge their interests. If we want to have an equal, just and fully, democratic society, Maharjan argues, the present exam system needs to be changed entirely. In an interesting article, Gopilal Neupane (2002) asks if those responsible for managing the SLC

should consider the extenuating circumstances in which the students were taking the SLC examinations in April 2002 and think of ways to compensate them in terms of Grades. In particular, he points out that during the course of the Maoist insurgency, students have had to endure much trauma that have negatively impacted them and their performance in the SLC. Ways to compensate those students who have been exposed to such trauma and also those who, for reasons associated with the conflict, have been deprived of routine preparation and 'practice' time, should be discussed, argues Neupane.

Citing the SLC results of 2058 BS, educationist Mana Prasad Wagley (2002) offers his views on why so many students fail. First of all, he argues that the Ministry of Education is not clear about what knowledge and skills it expects in students who pass SLC. Secondly, addition of new subjects in the curriculum does not mean that students are learning more. Wagley holds the view that they should be asked to study only a language, math, science, and social studies. The current mechanism whereby students are expected to study eight subjects and appear in the SLC of 800 full marks is the main source of the negative results. Like Yuvaraj Pandey, Wagley sees no reason why SLC students should be asked to answer questions based on materials they had studied in class nine. Wagley also discusses other aspects of our education system that need to be reformed to improve the results. In terms of educational administration in the districts, he suggests that education officers should not transfer teachers based on their political loyalties. While acknowledging the lack of adequate number of teachers in remote areas in general and especially subject-specialist teachers, Wagley holds the view that if only the existing teachers were honest, not much else would be necessary to raise the pass percentage to about 50. The unions of the teachers should pay attention to this, states Wagley, concluding that the quality of education will only go up through the coordinated action of the Government, district administration, teachers' unions, and teachers themselves.

Durga Pokharel (2002) suggests that the way to improve our SLC pass rate is to completely restructure our school system and that class one through six should be declared primary education and no one should be failed in these Grades as also at the end of class six, those who do not or can not pursue further education should be given the opportunity to pursue trade school. She adds that the same should also be available to those who want to drop out of school after Grade eight, Grades nine through twelve should be declared high school and no one should be failed in these Grades. Combined with other changes related to the infrastructural needs of public schools, the division of the curriculum into core and optional subjects and an appropriate management model for schools, Pokharel argues that the restructuring of the school system she has proposed will relieve the country of the accumulated burden of those declared 'failed' in SLC each year. That burden is also rhetorically described by Jyoti Devkota (2003).

Mahakanta Jha (2003) looks into the sources of irregularities in SLC examinations. Above all, he identifies two reasons: one is the linkage between Government subsidies to public schools who manage to pass more than fifteen percent of their students in the SLC, adding that schools which fall below this rate for three consecutive years do not get Government help giving rise to a 'no matter what students have to pass' mentality inducing irregularities. Secondly, he argues that there is less than enough budget allocation to cover the costs of those who are asked to manage examinations at the district level. Prashrit (2003) argues that the only way to stop the avalanche of failures in SLC in the short run is to open a trade-school like tract for students after Grade five. Students from Grade six and above, he says, can opt for this tract and learn many 'livelihood' skills that could be certified through another mechanism. Such an arrangement would generate the low-skilled work force needed by Nepal, he adds. On the other hand,

Badri Prasad Dahal (2003) focuses on the exam execution process of the OCE and points out lapses that need correction or attention, including issues related to the setting of exam papers and their level of difficulty, exam time limitations, exam environment related to test centers, copy marking procedures, etc. Ramesh Prasad Gautam (2004), the principal of a public school in Kathmandu, wonders why pass rate had increased to 46.18 in 2060 BS. Although the increase by more than 14 percent over the previous year was welcome, he says, the sources of this increase remain a mystery. Given that interference in school education due to political instability has increased and not decreased, Gautam suspects the generous adding of grace marks to students' Grades, previous target setting for pass rate, or self-learning by the students in their homes (when school classes were interrupted) had something to do with the increase. Despite being satisfied with the overall pass rate, Gautam remains unhappy with the pass rate (below 25 %) of most of the public schools. The exceptions in the latter category include schools like Padmodaya in Kathmandu which Gautam heads and which has passed more than 90 percent of its students in most years.

Joshi (2004) argues that one way to increase the pass rate is to adopt a 'subject pass' system whereby students are offered the option to appear for tests in only subjects of their choosing and offers some measures to improve the record of the public schools. Most of what he has to say is related to a better execution of the commitments of teachers and management committees, issues that others have touched upon. However, he proposes that given the poor results of students in schools in the Himalayan region, a separate curriculum based on their social, economic, and geographical 'needs' should be prepared and a corresponding SLC examinations should be arranged for them.

Gorkhapatra: There are 18 articles from this newspaper in the research archive. Although all mention SLC, some do so only in passing with not much to say about it. Others repeat much of what has already been discussed in this report. Hence only those articles with a substantial focus on SLC (and in which some new points are made) are discussed. Devi Prasad Ojha (2000), a former minister, argues that given the vast difference between schools in different parts of Nepal with respect to physical and other facilities, the tradition of evaluating students from these schools based on a single format (namely, SLC) has to be abandoned. Ojha does not say what should replace the current system. Shiv Prasad Bhattarai (2000) makes an interesting observation given that most students who take SLC sent-up examinations pass and hence become eligible to appear in SLC examinations, the fact that more than half such students then fail the SLC each year raises questions regarding the credibility of both the sent-up and SLC examinations. Even though Bhattarai does not put it this way, this fact points to several possibilities: the sent-up exam is not of the same difficulty level or its answer copies are marked more generously than those of the SLC, etc.

After discussing many of the usual themes associated with the management of SLC examinations, Acharya (2001a) states that we as a society are not clear about whether the SLC should be made simpler or more complex in the name of reforming it. He suggests that giving the responsibility of managing SLC to schools themselves is a good idea. If that is unlikely, he suggests district-wise decentralization of SLC. Much of the same is repeated in Acharya's second (2001b) article published three months later. Oli (2002) suggests that punishing those schools which fail to maintain at least a pass percentage of 15 or above for three years in a row does nothing to improve the quality of education in those schools. If those responsible for such poor results should be punished, then that punishment should also be meted out to district education offices and the OCE itself, adds Oli. Pradip Gyawali (2002) blames post-Panchayat

Governments for failing to come up with robust educational policies under which the SLC could be reformed. The current system does not train students in livelihood earning skills. Instead, it prepares an army of SLC failures who are unemployed, adds Gyawali. He also faults HMG/N's inadequate investment in public education and its inability to provide and support teachers to public schools and notes that given the ongoing conflict, teachers are under pressure from both warring sides and hence have not been able to do their duties. Much of this discussion is repeated in Gyawali's second article (2003).

Deuja (2003) looks at the SLC results for the batch of 2059 BS (pass rate about 32%) and laments the waste of our society's investment in secondary education as represented in those results. Most of what he has to say is not original and has been discussed previously. However, he mentions in passing that among those who are enrolled in high school, girl students have a tougher time to attend classes regularly because they have to help in domestic work. Although he does not say it, the implication is that because they have less time to study, girl students do less well than boys in SLC.¹⁴ Umakanta Acharya (2005) lists many of the initiatives taken in recent years – most of which have been discussed previously – to improve the management aspects of SLC exam. Stating that these are not enough, Acharya lists some suggestions including an increase in the exam fees and an increase in the remuneration paid to those involved in the exam execution and copy marking. It is suggested that those involved in irregularities during the SLC exam should be charged under corruption laws. Acharya argues that the grace mark system should be scrapped or, if it needs to exist, pre-announced grace marks should only be given to girl students. In his third article of SLC published in *Gorkhapatra*, Nirmal Kumar Acharya (2005) discusses irregularities reported during the SLC examinations of 2005 and mentions recent efforts at improving SLC exam process and repeats his recommendations from his 2001 articles. In particular, he suggests that the management of SLC examinations should be devolved to the regional and district levels.¹⁵

Letters to the editor

As mentioned earlier, no systematic attempt was made to collect all letters to the editors about SLC published in newspapers researched for this study for the time period covered. However, about a dozen such letters are included in the research archive from some of the newspapers. They were published last year (namely 2061 BS) covered by this study. Since letters express the views and opinions of the letter writers, they have been treated as cameo op-ed articles and hence discussed here.

Several of the letters are related to irregularities in exam registration and execution process. For instance, in a letter to the editor of *Gorkhapatra* published a few days before the 2061 BS SLC examinations (5/12/2061; 18 March 2005), Dhan Bahadur Shrestha of Okhaldhunga hopes that the examinations will be held without students and invigilators indulging in cheating. Shrestha argues that examinations are meant to test the examinees; they are not homework sessions. A letter expressing similar sentiments written by Gopal Bhandari of Biratnagar was published in *Kantipur* a week later (12/12/2061; 25 March 2005). Around the same time (13/12/2061; 26

¹⁴ This gender disparity is further discussed in Bhatta (2004).

¹⁵ In passing, Acharya (2005) also notes that since the reasons why many students fail the SLC are known, it is interesting to note that a study with financial assistance from the Danish government is being carried out to find why so few students pass the SLC. He is obviously referring to the ongoing study on student performance in SLC of which this report constitutes a small part.

March 2005), the *Gorkhapatra* published a letter from the principal of a high school in Kathmandu denying that his school had tried to register more examinees for the upcoming SLC beyond the declared deadline. The name of that school had been included in an earlier report in the same newspaper which described the unsuccessful activity of a gang that supposedly tried to register new students for SLC by taking various sums of money from them.

In the following week, several letters were published commenting on the institutional scams that had resulted in several hundred potential SLC candidates being denied the opportunity to appear in the SLC examinations. Those who ran such institutions had taken money from these students promising both proper registration and passing Grades in SLC but it turned out that these institutions never really registered the students for SLC with the proper authorities. This was discovered just before the examinations when the students were unable to get their admission cards for SLC examinations from these institutions. Not only that, those to whom the students had given their money were no where to be found. In a letter to the editor of *Annapurna Post* published on 16/12/2061 (29 March 2005) Pradip Pokharel of Kathmandu says that those who operated such institutions should be punished immediately. In a letter published in *Rajdhani* on 21/12/2061 (3 April 2005) Krishna Pathak exhorts future SLC candidates, journalists, and the Ministry of Education to be on the look out for advertisements by similar con artists and institutions. Madhav Giri, in a letter to the editor of *Kantipur* (17/12/2061; 30 March 2005) argues that students conned by such institutions should not be punished. As a teacher he states that such institutional scams were on the rise with the complicity of officers from the district educational offices. On the same day, *Kantipur* published a letter by Sushil Rajthala from Bhaktapur who stated that there were institutions which could arrange SLC pass certificates for interested individuals for a sum. The cases being reported in 2005 must be those in which such institutions failed to arrange the “proper channels”, adds the letter writer. Since the whole system is rotten, what can we expect from anyone, asks Rajthala rhetorically.

After the examinations were over, Jagan Niraula from Biratnagar sent a letter to the editor of *Kantipur* (28/12/2061; 10 April 2005) stating that as a teacher he had hoped that the SLC of 2061 BS, held under the State of Emergency (declared by King Gyanendra), would not be marred by the kinds of irregularities he had seen in previous years. Instead, he said that there was no difference in the way in which cheating by students took place with the complicity of exam invigilators. There were other letters too. In a letter to the editor of *Annapurna Post* published on 1/12/2061 (14 March 2005), Jyoti Khatiwada of Dhading praised the work of FM Radio Shreenagar of Tansen for providing SLC lessons on air as had been reported by the same newspaper the previous week. Khatiwada suggested that other FM radio stations should also broadcast similar programs. In a letter to the editor of *Kantipur* published on 9/12/2061 (22 March 2005), Bijaya Shrestha of Morang suggests that the decision of the Government to locate the SLC exam centers only in the district headquarters adds extra financial and other burdens on the students. He suggests that this decision indicates that the Government is afraid of the insurgents. Instead, he says that the Government should have shown the courage to hold the examinations in centers beyond the district headquarters in relatively safe districts such as Morang, Jhapa, and Sunsari.

There was only one letter to the editorial in the research archive which was concerned with the overall reform agenda of SLC. Written by Kiran Lohani from Kathmandu and published in *Kantipur* on 12/12/2061 (25 March 2005), it begins by stating that despite many commentaries on the mistakes and inadequacies of the past SLC examinations, there was no evidence of reform in the exam system of the SLC. Lohani states that it is unlikely that the students will get

satisfactory marks just based on the teaching in schools. Strikes, uncomfortable logistical situation in the district headquarters during the examinations, and the heavy security arrangements (including a curfew during the evening and night hours) are likely to negatively influence student results, adds Lohani. He proposes several ideas to reform SLC. First he says that there must be broad reforms in the teaching methods in schools. Second, he states that the threat to cut off educational subsidy to schools with poor results induces teachers to put a lot of pressure on their students. If they can not realize expected results, the teachers and the students will immerse themselves in self-guilt, adds Lohani. Instead, he says the education imparted throughout the year should be more practical-oriented. He adds that the exam system and the question papers must be scientific and practical in nature.

Conclusion

In section two of this report, it was mentioned that op-ed articles are textual windows through which we get access to the views of a small set of experts, commentators, and writers on issues related to various aspects of the SLC exam system. After briefly reproducing the views expressed by several dozen commentators and writers (including those who sent letters to the editors) in this section, we can reach the following conclusions.

The dismal results of SLC are related to our lack of clarity regarding the objectives of the SLC curriculum and the examinations. The disappointing results are also the fruit of an exam dominated evaluation system in which there is no continuous evaluation of students but rather a three-hour end-of-the-year exam determines their fate. The poor results are also tied to defects in the curricula and its vast scope distributed in eight subjects of 100 marks each. They are also related to the framing of question papers on the textbooks read in both Grades nine and ten and on defects regarding levels of difficulties in alternate and parallel sets of question papers that are currently in use.

Irregularities in the exam and marking process contribute to the defects of the exam system. Some initiatives to violate the code of conduct of examinations are linked to provisions of subsidies provided to public schools. Others are related to the lack of adequate budget for exam management and the lack of a strong punitive system for violators. The conflict has made the exam process more expensive and less comfortable for examinees due in part to the relocation of exam centers in district headquarters. The conflict has also contributed to deterioration of the educational environment in schools all over the country and induced a situation of fear in both teachers and students. These conditions obviously have some influence on student performance in SLC examinations.

There is widespread disparity in the SLC results of private and public schools and between urban and rural schools, a reflection of social injustice in our educational system and fueled by and feeding the ongoing conflict. The poor result of most rural public schools is tied to the poverty of schools and students, many of whom have to do plenty of domestic and farm-related work. As a result, they and especially girl students can not devote their time to school studies. The low SLC performance of rural schools is tied to the lack of qualified teachers, especially in subjects such as math, science, and English, lack of application on the part of teachers, and absence of physical resources and sometimes textbooks which are not available on time. The poor SLC performance of rural schools is also related to the frequent closure of schools due to strikes plus extreme politicization of the teachers and management system and absence of a credible system of rewards and punishment for those found wanting in executing their responsibilities. Some commentators feel that the widespread commercialization of secondary education in post-

Panchayat Nepal has resulted in the official neglect of public schools and students who study in such schools. The commentators have also expressed their views on what needs to be done to reform the SLC exam system. They are given in Section five of this report where the overall recommendations of the public to improve SLC are discussed.

Reporting

Most of the reports are what can be described as factual simple reports based on press handouts or routine journalistic inquiries. Comparatively few long and in-depth analytical reports exist in the research archive. Reading the reports from various newspapers during the time period covered by this study reveals a lot of repetitions in both the themes pursued and the manner in which they are represented to readers. Many of the themes of these reports are subjects that have already been discussed in the previous two sections on editorials and op-ed articles.¹⁶ Hence it would be tedious to summarize each and every simple report here. Instead, a brief composite characterization is provided for most of the simple reports. For ease of reading, they are organized around certain familiar themes.

Policy: Some reports have highlighted that our school educational policy is wrong in the sense that our school education does not provide practical or vocational skills to the students. Within the existing policy, the exam system is the dominant modality of evaluating students. The examinations are used to pass or fail students but not to provide effective feedback in their education. The exam system in SLC is also collective subject-oriented (students have to pass all subjects) and does not provide single subject certification. Our secondary education system allows for the existence of Government-supported public schools where students study for nominal fees and privately owned and operated schools where students are charged significant fees. This existence of two types of schools promotes disparity between students who study in them and also allows the economic status of families to determine student's access to the type of school she can attend.

Public school environment: In the post-Panchayat period, newspaper reports have emphasized that public school environment has become highly politicized. The loyalty of teachers to political parties has surpassed their loyalties to the management committee of schools for which they work. They have ultimately been found wanting in fulfilling their responsibilities toward students. The political economy of rural public schools is such that they can not recruit and retain qualified teachers in specific subjects such as English, math, and science, the three subjects in which most of the students who fail SLC do not get a passing Grade. These schools also lack physical facilities such as labs.

Irregularities/mistakes during the exam process: Many reports are dedicated to discussions about irregularities during examinations. They discuss the discovery of massive amounts of chits in exam centers. They also report cheating by students and the illegal activities of invigilators and exam center supervisors. We get to read about fake examinees and fake invigilators. In terms of mistakes, we get to hear about exam centers without adequate infrastructure to conduct the examinations. Such centers are often selected, according to newspaper reports, under political

¹⁶ There are quite a few human interest stories in these reports that need not be discussed here. They pertain to things like certain kinds of physically challenged individuals doing well in the SLC, unexpected happenings during the exam time such as examinees giving birth to a child, future plans of highly successful students, social felicitations of SLC toppers, SLC tutorials over FM radio, etc.

pressure to 'help' students from certain schools. There are reports about exam centers not having the question papers for optional subject examinations where examinees had to wait until photocopies of such questions were secured from other exam centers. In recent years, there have also been reports about mistakes and irregularities in the registration of students. Fake tuition centers and institutes have deprived groups of students from appearing in the SLC examinations. There have also been mistakes in the processing of application forms resulting in the allocation of wrong symbol numbers.

Conflict-induced difficulties: Many reports have discussed the difficulties faced by students and teachers because of the ongoing conflict in Nepal. They have highlighted how the conflict has resulted in periodic closure of schools and generation of fear during exam times. They have also discussed the logistical problems faced by students who have had to travel to district headquarters to appear in the SLC examinations in the last few years. In addition to difficulties related to finding temporary housing and other logistics, students have had to face unnecessary hassles from Maoist insurgents and the state security forces. Both armed forces have often stopped students from traveling to district headquarters or subjected them to demoralizing security enquiries and searches.

Results: Many reports have discussed the unpredictability of SLC results release process criticizing the Government's decision to only make the results public in print in the state-owned newspaper *Gorkhapatra*. Newspapers produced by the private sector have also reported how the *Gorkhapatra* with the results is not made easily available in locations outside of the Kathmandu Valley. After the results are made public each year, many newspapers publish reports discussing them. Results are often first presented at the national level and in subsequent days, discussions at the regional or district levels are often published. Reports based on interviews with SLC toppers and post-mortems of the poor pass rates are often published simultaneously. The latter reports tend to include quotes from officials from the OCE and other experts including school managers, educationists, and education researchers. They tend to focus mostly on the pass rate differential between private and public schools and include quotes from various experts on the social significance of this disparity.

Subsequently news about the felicitations of successful students is simultaneously published with reports about schools with very poor results over the consecutive years. After a week or so from the day of release of results, newspapers also tend to report about mistakes in transcripts of the examinations. These include mistakes related to the personal details of students, mistake in the identification of toppers in various categories, mistakes in the copying of the marks, etc.¹⁷

3. COVERAGE IN POKHARA-BASED NEWSPAPERS

As mentioned earlier, three daily newspapers (*Janamat*, *Hotline*, and *Pokharapatra*) published from Pokhara were researched to find out what they had published about the SLC.¹⁸ The relevant reports, articles, and editorials were photocopied and a research archive was prepared. In this archive, there were 41 items from *Janamat*, mostly published between Baisakh 2057 BS and Chait

¹⁷ A separate conclusion for this sub-section is not provided here to avoid the repetition of what has already been said in the previous two sub-sections.

¹⁸ See Parajulee (2002) for a detailed discussion about the media scene in Pokhara. Some of what he predicted as the future of print media in Pokhara has come through (personal communication, April 2005).

2058 BS. There were 22 items from *Hotline*, mostly published between 2057 BS and 2059 BS. There were 19 items from *Pokharapatra* all published in 2060 BS. In this archive, most of the pieces are reports and there are only a few editorials (four in total) and op-ed articles (two in total). This section is organized according to the three genres of contents: editorial, op-ed article, and reporting.

Editorial

There were only four editorials, three in *Janamat* and one in *Hotline*.

Janamat: The first of the three editorials published in *Janamat* (8/1/2057) discusses problems in the education section in broad terms. It uses the occasion of the near completion of SLC examinations to ruminate loudly about these problems. It argues that education above the SLC level – higher education – is not meant for all. Hence for many SLC is the last educational degree they will get. Such students should be taught livelihood-earning skills. The editorial adds that thought has been given to such skills; it was only the case that real programs based on those thought had not come into fruition and hence investments made in education were being wasted.

The editorial then recounts the history of educational institutions in Nepal in terms of ownership before going on to discuss the disparities in SLC results between Government and private schools. To explain this disparity, the editorial takes recourse to the repeated selection procedures of the private schools whereby weak students are not allowed to appear in the SLC examinations. The class size is also said to be small in such schools. Instead, in the Government schools, no such selection takes place. The crowded classrooms of such schools are filled by students who can not afford the fees but also do not have the money to buy necessary stationary. The students who by necessity have to devote some part of their time to other activities are taught by teachers who carry the flags of various parties and repeat their slogans to save their jobs. Hence the editorial argues that the class division in our society was being exacerbated by these two types of schools and a large part of the investments made in school education was being wasted every year. Given the talk about handing over the schools to their communities for management, the editorial warns that if this kind of management is left in the hands of party-politicized people, it will not make much difference. The need of the hour to solve the multi-faceted problems of education, the editorial concludes, is to free education from the control of the Government and party politics and make its administration and management fully responsible.

The second editorial published in *Janamat* (20/12/2058) makes a strong argument as to why the *bandh* called by the Maoists to coincide with SLC examinations that were to start on 20 Chait 2058 BS should be revoked. It argues that given the importance of SLC examinations in the lives of students, the Maoist call had induced a great mental impact on students and their parents. The editorial argues that it is everyone's responsibility to see that the SLC examinations are conducted without any hassles in a peaceful manner.

The third editorial published in *Janamat* (2060 BS, date not mentioned) begins by stating that only 32.05 percent of the students who appeared in the SLC examinations passed the SLC of 2059 BS. It also states that among those who passed the examinations, two-thirds come from private schools and only one-third from public schools. This is a reflection of the dismal state of education in Government schools, adds the editorial. Given the colossal number of failures, the results are a reflection of the failure of our investment in education which is contributing to

social imbalance, claims the editorial. The results also force us to think about the exam system and the fact that students from the two different types of schools can not compete with each other. To upgrade the educational status of public schools and to provide trained teachers in them, it now looks like the responsibility should fall upon the shoulders of communities. Without improving the condition of Government schools, the editorial adds, it is useless to hope for better SLC results. Political parties and student organizations should draw the Government's attention to the problems of Government schools so that their condition may be bettered and efforts made by the private schools to secure good SLC performance might be emulated in public schools.

Hotline: The one and the only editorial in *Hotline* (12/1/2058) in the research archive argued for reforms in the exam system. Given that SLC is considered the 'iron gate' for the future of students, it was high time that we became serious about the standard of SLC and about conducting the examinations without irregularities, stated the editorial. The irregularities reported in the past several years have reduced the standards of SLC examinations. Weaknesses in educational policies and related laws and politicization of the education sector have also contributed to this state of affairs, added the editorial. The indifference of HMG/N and importing of fake certificates from India have contributed to low morale amongst teachers. The editorial added that the politicization of the process through the chiefs of exam centers, invigilators, teachers and the process of copy marking were the main causes behind lack of quality in SLC examinations. This process has resulted in the appointment of people based on their political affiliation and in the marginalization of capable people. To stop this process, the politicization rampant in the appointment of teachers has to be stopped. HMG/N should also implement transparent policies and laws in this regard. The editorial further added that the exam system must be reformed and the import of fake certificates from India must be stopped. It also mentioned that irregularities in the exam centers must be dealt with immediately. The Education Ministry should implement rules that it had designed so that the present problems could be reduced gradually, concluded the editorial.

Op-Ed Article

There were only two op-Ed articles, one in *Janamat* and the other in *Hotline* in the research archive.

Janamat: The piece in *Janamat* was written by a certain Shreekanta Paudel (2058 BS) under the title "Questions raised by the SLC examinations in Kaski". In the beginning of his article, Paudel lists six public schools in Kaski which failed to pass any of their students in the SLC held in Baisakh 2057 BS and mentions the names of three other schools in which a small percentage of students passed. In the second half of his article Paudel presents several factors that seem to him to explain this status quo. First he blames His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMG/N) for not being able to do anything to mend this situation. The concerned educational offices seem to be doing nothing, he charges. In addition, he says that the frequent changes in educational policy have contributed to confusion regarding the goals of the education system. The delegation of school management to the community or management committee, he adds, has contributed to the further politicization of the education sector. The management committee is constituted in the recommendation of a specific political party, adds Paudel, and this process marginalizes education specialists as well as qualified and diligent teachers.

Paudel also argues that the changes in school academic calendar have hampered the planning process of teachers in schools. However, he reserves most of his ire to the non-functioning of

the management committee of the schools. In particular, he says that such committees have to be able to mobilize human and other resources, both within the school institution and the larger community in which the school is located. Continuous monitoring of the work of the committee by parents and intermittent initiatives taken by the headmasters of schools should go a long way in solving the problem, argues Paudel. Finally he argues that schools with poor results need to be investigated and punished by the relevant authorities.

Hotline. The op-ed piece published in *Hotline* was written by Yuvaraj Khanal and published just after the conclusion of the SLC examinations in Baisakh 2058 BS (April 2001). In it Khanal (2058 BS) recounts many irregularities during the execution of SLC examinations, says that the alternate questions papers set for English and Math were not of the same difficulty level and laments about the abundant availability of guess papers and how those who relied on such study aids seem to feel as though they would get first division marks whereas those who had genuinely prepared for examinations were frustrated. He guesses that given the demands of teaching in their respective schools, it was more than likely that the answer copies would be checked by lazy headmasters and HMG/N workers who had never taught in schools than experienced teachers. Given this environment, Khanal argues that passing SLC has become too much a matter of chance or luck.

Reporting

There is a preponderance of simple reporting in the form of news reports. No long-length in-depth or investigative reports were located. Amongst the simple reports, the following subjects were mentioned.

Janamat. When the SLC examinations started on 2 Baisakh 2057 BS (April 2000), a report stated that the total number of students taking the examinations in Kaski district that year exceeded 5,000. The same report mentioned that there were 20 test centers with some students absent on the first day (3/1/2057). When the results of those SLC examinations came out almost two months later, *Janamat* covered it as its main report on 18/3/2057. “SLC Exam results published: The results of most of the private schools in Kaski good” was the headline. In the report, it was stated that although the *Gorkhapatra* with the SLC results had not arrived in Pokhara, schools in Pokhara had managed to check the results of their students via phone with Kathmandu. That report went on to list several private schools all of whose students had passed SLC in first division. It also listed the results of several other private schools. In an accompanying first page report, the same newspaper featured a report with the headline “Those who had come to check the SLC results have gone back disappointed,” that highlighted the fact that many students who had come to Pokhara from its surrounding areas waited the whole day for the *Gorkhapatra* with SLC results to arrive. Since it did not come until late in the evening, they either returned disappointed or had to lodge themselves in the local hotels that evening, adding to their costs. The report stressed that it was not the first occasion when such a thing had happened and that the students were seen to be calling Kathmandu from telephone centers in downtown Pokhara, to check with their relatives and acquaintances their results. On the following day, the same newspaper reported that 47 percent students from Kaski had passed SLC examinations. Results from other locations in the Western region (for instance, Lamjung) were still being reported in *Janamat* almost a month and half later (10/5/2057).

This newspaper also published some reports during the SLC of 2058 BS (April 2001). The report published on 2/1/2058 contained data on the numbers and names of test centers as well as the numbers of students who appeared for the examinations that year. During the course of

the examinations in the next few days, the newspaper reported several cases of irregularities: students being rusticated from various test centers for violating the examinations codes, fake invigilators arrested, etc. When the results were out, several reports discussed results and performance of various schools and students. On 6/4/2058, *Janamat* carried a report from the national news agency, RSS, of a discussion organized in Kathmandu by the Education Journalist Group. In the report it is mentioned that the low national pass rate for that year (31.62 %) had raised questions about the credibility of the SLC curriculum and the exam system. On that occasion, it is mentioned that the speakers highlighted the following factors behind the dismal pass rate: lack of diligence (compared to previous years) on the part of the students, bad influence of politics on students and teachers alike, influence of *bandhs* and strikes, deterioration of the teaching-cum-learning environment, lack of subject-specific and competent teachers. Others also pointed out that the changes made in curriculum, increase in the total full marks for the exam system and in copy marking could have also influenced the SLC pass rates for that year.

When the results were out, news about the felicitation of students from various schools and ethnic groups were published on many occasions. Also a report saying grants provided to schools with pass rates less than 15 percent in the past three years would be reduced was published (32/4/2058). This report focused on the schools in the district of Tanahu in the Western region.

During the following test cycle, some reports linked the examinations with the prevailing conflict. While the Maoist insurgents had called for a *bandh* to coincide with the SLC examinations, the authorities claimed that the examinations would go ahead nevertheless (6/12/2058). Another report mentioned that due to the security situation, all the test centers for the district of Parbat had been moved to its headquarters in Kusma and that students who had come to Kusma were being asked to not roam around after 7:30 pm in the evening. The local administration had announced this apparently to reduce the threat from terrorists who might have come to the town in the disguise of students (6/12/2058). Reports published during the examinations discussed irregularities.

Hotline: Reports published in the second Pokhara daily *Hotline* were qualitatively not too different from those published in *Janamat*. Reports published during the course of the examinations in Baisakh 2058 BS (April 2001) highlight various irregularities. One such report mentions the arrest of a fake invigilator and other irregularities in a test center in Parbat (3/1/2058). A follow-up report mentions that the exam center chief who was complicit in making it possible for the fake invigilator to be present in the exam room had absconded (7/1/2058).

Reports published during the course of the examinations in Chait 2058 BS (April 2002) highlight the numbers of exam centers in Kaski district and the numbers of students appearing for the examinations. Given the *bandh* called by Maoists to coincide with the examinations, the reports also highlighted the fact that the army had been mobilized to provide security to exam centers (e.g., 21/12/2058). Some reports highlighted the routine aspects of exam operation (number of absentee examinees, etc.) while others mentioned instances of individuals appearing for examinations under specific circumstances (e.g., a suspected Maoist who was allowed to take the examinations in prison, a male student mourning the death of one of his parents, etc.). When the results were published some months later, a student from Pokhara, Suyog Bhandari, secured the highest marks in the entire country. News about the planned felicitation of him by the Pokhara Sub-Metropolitan City was published (14/3/2059) along with other reports highlighting the success of other students (27/3/2059) and their felicitations (23/3/2059).

Pokharapatra: Reports from another Pokhara newspaper *Pokharapatra* were available for the year 2060 BS only. They too are not qualitatively different from those published in the two other newspapers discussed above. The results for the 2059 BS batch of SLC students came out on 31 Jeth 2060 BS. Routine analyses of results were published. In one such piece, it was mentioned that 48.56 percent of students from Kaski had passed the examinations. Information on schools where all students had passed the SLC were also provided in the same report (1/3/2060). On the same day, another report discussed the happiness of a blind student in Baglung who had passed the examinations and wanted to go on to college to become a teacher. Reports on subsequent days discussed the results in more detail in Kaski and neighbouring district (e.g., 2/3/2060, 3/3/2060). There were other stories published as well. For example, one was published on the suicide of a woman who had failed the SLC (2/3/2060); others on felicitation program organized by Ward no 8 of Pokhara (22/3/2060) and a school (25/4/2060).

About a week before the SLC examinations were to commence on 13 Chait 2060 BS (end March 2004), the Maoists attacked the district headquarters of Myagdi district, Beni. During the attack, many Government buildings were destroyed. The SLC exam questions were stored at the district police office which was also destroyed. Following this incident, it was reported that copies of the questions had been destroyed and some were circulating in the neighbouring district of Baglung (11/12/2060). The students in Myagdi feared that they might not be able to give the examinations as per the announced schedule (12/12/2060). This fear was genuine because given that a set of questions was prepared for the entire Western development region, any replacement set had to be distributed to all 16 districts of the region. In another report published on the same day, this fear was allayed by the district education officer who said that the replacement set had already arrived in the district (12/12/2060). Reports also mentioned the fact that since the examinees had come to the district headquarters of Parbat, Kusma, to appear for the examinations, there was a housing crunch resulting in 10-15 students living in a room.(12/12/2060).

Conclusion

Reportings in Pokhara newspapers largely focus on various types of irregularities in the execution of SLC examinations. There are some reports which have a 'human interest' angle to them and some are related to the ongoing conflict-induced difficulties for the examinees. SLC exam results at the national, district, city, and school levels have been reported and some comparisons made. When local students have done well, their success has been highlighted whereas bad results have rarely been examined beyond the fact stating so. There are very few editorials in the Pokhara papers about the SLC. The ones that exist discuss the disparities in results between the private and Government schools. They also point to the politicization of the education process (policies, appointments of teachers and exam center chiefs, etc.) to account for the dismal state of affairs. They exhort for reforms in the Government schools and the SLC exam process so that the SLC results could be improved. Op-ed articles locate SLC results within the larger dismal environment of educational policy, politics of school management, and changes in educational calendar, and provide some recommendations.

All in all, contents analysis of the Pokhara papers reveals that with respect to public perceptions of SLC exam performance, broad-type analysis is dominant. While describing SLC as an 'iron gate' to be passed by students, Pokhara papers analyzes SLC exam performance in terms of the inadequacies of the examination system and irregularities in it. The dismal performance has been tied to bad educational policies, pessimism in teachers, the fact of schools being converted to

political battlefields, and the sorry state of public schools, particularly their management aspects. This state of affairs has meant that there has been wastage of state's investment in school education and social inequality is growing, write-ups in Pokhara papers conclude. Although the Pokhara papers add some regional details to the national scene, they do not provide substantially new insights into the public perceptions regarding SLC after one has read the coverage by Kathmandu-based newspapers.

4. CONCLUSIONS: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF SLC PERFORMANCE DETERMINANTS

In the public perception in Nepal, SLC is an important event in the lives of students. Hence it is portrayed as an 'iron gate' to higher education and further opportunities in the job market. The public has commented repeatedly on the high failure rate of SLC. It considers this failure as a waste of both state and private investments in education at a massive level. In particular, the public has expressed concern about the many disparities in the SLC exam system. The many differences in the performance of public and private schools and schools in the rural and urban areas have been highlighted. The Nepali public has pointed out the absolutely poor results of many public schools from which many if not all SLC candidates have tended to fail. Nepalis are worried that since students from the relatively poor families are studying in public schools in rural Nepal and these schools in general tend to have a poor pass rate, the current SLC system is contributing toward the creation of a education-based two-class Nepali society. This fact potentially fuels the current conflict and could be the source of yet another conflict in the future.

It would not be necessary to repeat at length what has already been discussed in Sections 3 and 4 of this report. To conclude succinctly, the public has listed the following factors as mainly responsible for the high failure rate in SLC:

1. Unstable educational policy;
2. A single exam-oriented educational system;
3. A requirement for passing all subjects; too big a burden on the students;
4. Poor educational environment in many public schools;
5. Poverty of the rural schools and students, many of whom have to do plenty of domestic and farm-related work;
6. Lack of physical resources in schools;
7. Lack of competent teachers, especially in subjects such as math, science, and English in rural schools;
8. Extreme politicization of teachers and management;
9. Absence of a credible system of rewards and punishment for those who are found wanting in executing their responsibilities;
10. Inadequacies in school textbooks and pedagogical system;
11. Inefficient OCE that is occasionally also seen to be susceptible to corruption in the management and publication of results;
12. Mistakes in exam questions and lack of timely availability of exam questions for optional papers;
13. Irregularities in the exam and marking process;

14. Irregularities in the making of transcripts with the Grades;
15. Conflict-induced closure of schools.

In concluding this analysis of public perceptions regarding the failures of the SLC exam system, it would be useful to tally what this study has found with the factors identified by Bhatta (2004) in his analysis of the SLC results of 2060 BS. According to Bhatta, the potential determinants of student performance in the SLC examinations are school type, gender, location, school size, and socio-economic conditions. Very little was found in this study in terms of the public making an issue of school size. Similarly, not much was found in terms of gender apart from a few references to girl students in rural Nepal having to devote more time than their male counterparts to domestic and farm-related work. Private schools and schools located in urban areas have been identified to provide a platform for better performance in SLC. Similarly, the ability of the family to pay for private education has been identified as a determinant of relatively good student performance in the SLC.

Options for action

The Nepali public agrees that the SLC exam system has to be drastically reformed. It seems to have two objectives for the reform exercise: one outcome of the reform has to be reflected in a much better SLC pass rate; the second outcome would be reflected in the ability of SLC curriculum to provide livelihood earning skills to both those who pass and fail the examinations. The public recognizes the many reform efforts being executed by the OCE, especially in the exam management aspects, but suggests that these are inadequate. This study of public perceptions of the SLC has revealed several options for action to improve the current SLC exam system. The more important among them are listed below:

1. Clarify the location of SLC in the overall objectives of teaching and learning in the secondary schools in Nepal;
2. Plan reforms in the SLC through active participation of its managers within His Majesty's Government of Nepal, teachers, students, guardians, parents, etc.;
3. Increase investment in public sector secondary education;
4. Decentralize the management of SLC to the regional, district, and school levels;
5. Make the curricula more practical-oriented and scope out possibilities for running parallel trade schools;
6. Abandon single template system for evaluating students;
7. Find a mechanism to do continuous evaluation of students; reduce the need to rely on a single end-of-the-year three-hour exam;
8. Simplify the SLC exam; there are many options: reduce the number of subjects examined; make all subjects optional; make the examinations based on class ten textbooks only; adopt a subject pass and certification system;
9. Don't have a pass/fail system or reduce the pass marks or provide routine grace marks;
10. Reform the school system below the SLC level so that low performing students are encouraged to go to trade schools or explore some other options for learning livelihood earning skills;
11. Provide more job security to public school teachers by reducing the politicization of their appointment process;
12. Provide more specific teacher training, etc.