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Original Article

Policymaking and Implementation in the Education Sector in Nepal

Rajesh Prasad Shrestha* 

Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal

Abstract

The education system in Nepal has been influenced by neoliberal reforms, foreign aid, and policies that promote national identity. Under federalism, education governance is decentralized, and local governments manage schools in Nepal. Still, there are difficulties matching local reality with global education models, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through theme coding and a comparative literature analysis, this study investigates education policymaking in Nepal using legal and academic papers. The results draw attention to poor policy execution, challenges with decentralization, and continuing disparities in quality education access. Further aggravating these problems are limited language policies, privatization, and poor local governance. Furthermore, a centralized, top-down approach to policymaking reduces grassroots stakeholder involvement, separating policy goals from actual educational outcomes. Addressing these difficulties calls for constant observation, coordinated policy development, and more active participation of stakeholders. Federalism allows locally motivated changes prioritizing grassroots needs, promoting a more efficient and fair education system.

Keywords: Nepal education system, policymaking practices, federal policies, Neoliberalism, foreign aid, inclusive education

* Author Email: rajeshprasad_mpedl2023@kusoed.edu.np  ISSN: 2091-0118 (Print) / 2091-2560 (Online)

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2707-9964>

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Introduction

Nepal's educational system has evolved significantly to guarantee equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all its citizens. There have been different players in the field of education in Nepal since history. Global policy, foreign aid, and national identity issues all played key roles in Nepal's educational framework. Several frameworks and policies have been put in place by the Nepalese government to improve education accessibility, public accountability, and governance. There has been a movement in Nepal's educational policy from centralized, nationalistic to more inclusive and varied frameworks influenced by national identity, political ideology, and foreign aid. Although early policy focused on national unity by linguistic homogenization, more recent reforms have recognized Nepal's ethnic and linguistic diversity. There are still issues, however, especially with neoliberal pressures prioritizing market-led policy and the privatization of education. As Nepal's education sector is modernizing, public policy, economic viability, and equal access remain the top agenda.

Nepal has kept all its possible approaches to reforming its education sector. Nepal has pledged to provide quality education to all citizens in the country so that equity of opportunity and inclusiveness shall flourish in the society. The Government of Nepal seeks to ensure the good governance, public policy, and accountability via different policy prescriptions, initiatives, strategies, and frameworks. Among these are The Constitution of Nepal, through which free and compulsory basic education (Grades 1-8) and free secondary education (Grades 9-12) have been guaranteed for all children (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015), The Education Act, 2028 (1971), which presents rules to establish and operate schools-including transfer, merging, naming, or closing of any school as may be required (The Education Act, 2028, 1971), The School Sector Development Plan (2016-2023), which envisages the upliftment of Nepal from a least developed nation by the year 2022 and achievement of the status of middle-income country by 2030 (MoE, 2016), School Education Sector Plan, 2022/23-2031/32, which aims to fulfill the government's commitment to provide compulsory and free education (School Education Sector Plan, 2022/23-2031/32, 2022), Local Government Operation Act, 2074, which seeks to strengthen local leadership and governance (Local Government Operation Act, 2074, 2017), The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education, 2075, which is aimed at assuring every student being provided basic

education and free secondary school (The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education, 2075, 2018), National Education Policy, 2076, which seeks to improve early childhood development through the establishment of child-friendly settings (National Education Policy, 2076, 2019), The Education Vision Paper 2079, which seeks to organize early childhood development and education to address the approach to child development, care, and education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022).

Historically, Nepal's educational policies have been significant in fostering national loyalty by connecting education with national interests and so directing government agendas. The Nepal National Education Planning Commission (1956), the National Education System Plan (1971), and the National Curriculum Framework (2007) all support this goal by putting a greater value on the Nepali language than regional languages to strengthen national unity (Caddell, 2007; Onta, 1996). These policy approaches were more focused on integrating national identity through language. Recent developments, however, recognize Nepal's ethnic and linguistic diversity, signifying a transformation in the perceptions of national identity within education (Gautam, 2022).

Education in Nepal has been influenced by government priorities and foreign aid interest - especially that of the U.S. Operations Mission (Regmi, 2024). King Mahendra established an All-Round National Education Commission in 1960 to provide suitable curriculum for the "political structure" of Nepal since he was cynical of a Western-style democracy (G. Sharma, 2021). The 1971 National Education System Plan (NESP) brought vocational training and adult education into Nepal but ignored Nepal's ethnic and linguistic diversity (Ministry of Education, 1971). Beginning in the 1980s, foreign donors implanted neoliberal language policies, further marginalizing ethnic minorities (B. K. Sharma & Phyak, 2017).

Public policy, according to Birkland (2020), is an official statement of governmental policies expressed as laws, rules, directives, or decisions. However, policymaking is not only a method of studying or resolving challenges; it has its' own political dimension. Sutton (1999) asserts that antagonism, power relations, and compromise among diverse stakeholders affect political decisions. This viewpoint contends that conflicting interests often shape policymaking and are more methodical than previously

recognized. As Ball (1994) highlighted, policymaking requires more than just the use of power. Policies are unstable, subject to change, and are continuously shaped and reshaped by local practices (Ball, 1994). Policies represent the continuing debates and discussions among many policy actors; hence, they are live, dynamic entities. Public policy, like legislation, executive orders, and other forms of governmental regulation, describes a set of measures governments take to improve people's lives (Knill & Tosun, 2008; Newton & Deth, 2011). From the perspective of Caramani (2011), most developing countries adopt similar public policy principles, including interactions between politicians, bureaucrats, and special interest groups or individuals.

One of the most critical issues Nepal faces, according to Karki (2024), is the effects of neoliberalism, which shows up in both national and local educational policies with its core ideas of deregulation, privatization, and less state intervention in social services treating education as a commodity and pushing market-oriented strategies influencing educational practices. Developing nations such as Nepal cannot shoulder the substantial responsibility of teaching its populace; nonetheless, the commercialization of education is not inherently detrimental since it provides exceptional efficiency in resource allocation and fosters self-motivation (Pandey, 2023).

Nepal's educational system still suffers continuous difficulties in policy execution, governance, and fair access despite ongoing reforms. The move to federalization and decentralized educational governance has led to administrative red tape, inconsistent policy implementation, and access discrepancies. The difficulties in decentralizing Nepal's education policy have led to inadequate institutional coordination, ineffective monitoring, and limited stakeholder engagement. Although the Constitution assures free education, disparities exist and expose the mirage of free education resulting from unseen expenses. Moreover, political interference has resulted in policy discontinuities and ineffectual changes. Funding and policy shaping in Nepal depend critically on the interest of foreign donor agencies and international organizations, yet occasionally, their impact conflicts with local needs. Standardization, flexibility issues, and teacher and workforce challenges are also hindering Nepal's institutional effectiveness. The cause of the increasing migration of Nepali students for further studies abroad is dissatisfaction with the home institutions. The study would look at the governance and policy challenges of the education system in Nepal, analyze the effect of

decentralization on equity, evaluate stakeholder participation, and assess education reforms with an aim to provide insight into strengthening Nepal education policies.

Federalization and Localized Educational Governance in Nepal

A significant change in Nepalese governance, especially in the realm of education, occurred with the country's 2015 Constitutional transition to federalism. The reform assigned control for primary and secondary education to 753 local governments, with the objective of improving localized decision-making, accountability, and service delivery (Schaffner et al., 2024). This decentralization aligns with Bulmer's (2017) assertion that in diverse countries, federalism can foster more significant opportunities for democratic participation, safeguard against the excessive concentration of power and resources, facilitate decision-making at the most appropriate level, and enhance service delivery and democratic resilience. Yet, implementing local governance of education in Nepal is constrained structurally and operationally. Most municipalities in Nepal are faced with a shortage of human resources, poor policy coherence, and political interference that weaken their capacity to provide quality education at the local level. Furthermore, local ownership, in reality, is limited by the dependency on international and local funds to translate education policy into action, where decision-making becomes subject to foreign influence (Mehendale, 2020). Local and global factors shape policymaking for the education sector in Nepal (National Planning Commission, 2017). While global norms enable the standardization of education policy, they also pose the risk of imposition of external agendas that are not aligned with local conditions. For Nepal's federalized management of education to be successful, local administrative capacity must be enhanced, fiscal decentralization must be enforced, and mechanisms for strengthening school-level accountability must be established (Schaffner et al., 2024). Without these reforms, the potential of localized education governance may remain unfulfilled, sustaining differences in educational quality among regions.

Policymaking Practices in Nepal

Challenges bedeviling the education system in Nepal include substandard quality, a high rate of dropouts, and inefficacious policies. Such issues remain even after the transitions to democratic regimes and the devolution of power to local governments in the nation. This is because there is a lack of ample grassroots support, few resources,

and intense political meddling. This study analyzes various policies related to higher education, highlighting the urgent necessity for a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to educational reform in Nepal.

Challenges in Decentralizing Nepal's Education Policy

After the democratic revolution that ousted the Rana regime, Nepal introduced a formal education system (Mehendale, 2020). Since then, many policies have been implemented to address the challenges within Nepal's education system. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) placed school education under the jurisdiction of local governments, granting them authority to create, enforce, and assess education-related policies. The Local Government Operation Act, 2074 has granted local governments twenty-three rights regarding school education. These rights include the ability to establish, enforce, oversee, and regulate policies (Local Government Operation Act, 2074, 2017).

Dhakal (2019) claims that in the present federal system education policy formation is spread throughout national and subnational government levels and has started to produce more pertinent policies with more local stakeholder involvement. National education policies have not been promulgated in a timely fashion, hence subnational governments must choose whether to wait until federal policies are developed or develop local policies first (Dhakal, 2019). Nepal's educational policies also failed due to improper communication regarding the provisions at the local level (Budhathoki, 2018). Budhathoki (2018) highlighted that, for instance, the School Improvement Plan (SIP) is currently in effect, still, our school stakeholders, headteachers, teachers, members of the school management committee (SMC), and chairs and officers of the parent-teacher association (PTA), are not aware of the procedure, lack the necessary skills in the vast majority of cases, and have no idea how to proceed.

Inequities and Access Issues

Nepal has significant disparities and inequalities in the availability of high-quality education, especially for the poor and disadvantaged populations (Gurung, 2022). In Nepal, there has been a surge in the privatization and commercialization of public services like education, and the result of these changes is a two-tiered society where the wealthy fund and support private services while political support and money for public services are severely restricted (Oxfam International & HAMI, 2019). Poor women and

girls, along with minorities, bear the most significant burden of inequality, which is fueled by privatization (Oxfam International & HAMI, 2019). Gurung (2022) highlighted that in order to regulate prejudice and discrimination, the government has passed some legislation and laws, followed numerous policy goals, and launched some development programs like social inclusion and affirmative action. Gurung (2022) noted that the establishment of these policies, legislations, and schemes did not ensure equity or social justice for oppressed and marginalized communities in Nepal, even after embracing federal democratic republics.

Nepal's 2021 census reported 124 languages as mother tongues and 117 as second languages (Nepal, 2023). The use of a single language in school, as identified by K.C. (2020), is primarily due to the political forces that oppress multilingual learners and create conditions that are socially unjust and obstruct the educational growth of such learners. K.C. (2020) contended that these language policies establish obstacles for children whose mother languages are excluded from the academic framework. The rising trend towards using English and other foreign languages in Nepal due to economic factors creates a conducive environment for specific languages offered in the education system to flourish, thereby inhibiting the effectiveness of indigenous language promotion (Poudel & Choi, 2022). Teachers and psychologists have denounced this trend, claiming that it doesn't address the issue of an already troubled educational system (Ojha, 2018). Implementing a foreign language in teaching basic concepts in science, numeracy, and literacy in early education negatively impacts children's cognitive development (Early & Cummins, 2011; Phyak, 2016).

Policy Implementation and Stakeholder Involvement

According to Regmi (2024), policymaking in Nepal is a top-down process by a few bureaucrats because there is no public involvement. Shah and Brett (2021) noted that educational policymaking in Nepal is a top-down and centralized process, which results in the low participation of stakeholders at the grassroots level and a mismatch between policy intentions and classroom practice. Dhakal (2019) contended that our current policymaking is guided by a "top-top approach" which is marked by negotiations and bargaining among the leaders of all sectors, including the government, the private sector, donors, development partners, and international commitments. Policies in contemporary times have failed to reach out to the grassroots stakeholders, including

students, parents, and teachers, which is due to the chronic fatigue of the governments to restrict the policymaking to an 'inner circle' (Dhakal, 2020). Nepal's educational policies also failed due to improper communication regarding the provisions at the local level (Budhathoki, 2018). The policy of delegating the management of schools to communities, which was adopted in 2003-2004, was also flawed as decision-makers did not assess the preparedness of parents and communities to take this responsibility (Budhathoki, 2018). As Neupane (2019) asserted, municipalities lack the necessary know-how, capacity, and materials to handle this task correctly and lack experience.

Various obstacles, including inadequate communication, substandard policy formulation, and insufficient execution, impede the execution of education policy in Nepal. C. Ghimire (2022) also noted issues like coordination gaps, resource scarcity, corruption, and political alteration of leadership that compromise attainment. The state has failed to implement policies like the Compulsory and Free Education Act 2075 (2018), which guarantees free education and subsidy on services to every student, because of the absence of the provision of financial resources in the education sector. A pressing need exists for a holistic school financing approach integrating quality assurance and accrediting objectives to improve educational results (M. Sharma et al., 2015).

The Myth of Free Education in Nepal

Nepalese Constitution envisages compulsory and free schooling education (The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education, 2075, 2018). All citizens of Nepal ensured free and compulsory education up to basic levels and cost-free education up to secondary levels as enshrined under Article 31(2) of the Constitution of Nepal (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015). However, successive governments still need to provide the funds required to execute the Constitutional mandates, forcing public schools to raise funds from parents and other third parties (B. Ghimire, 2022). In actuality, no community school in the nation has been able to offer "free" education thus far, making free education in Nepal merely a myth that only exists on paper (Republica, 2022). This demonstrates that the government has been making exaggerated claims about providing free education without intending to do so.

My Reflective Analysis on the Issue as an Educator

The federalization of Nepal in 2015 remained a major paradigm shift as far as the governance of the country is concerned, especially in education. Being an educational administrator and a scholar working with the field in question, I find myself supported and challenged by the decentralization of primary and secondary education to local government. On the one hand, the move towards local government is highly consistent with democratic values of participation and accountability. Allowing local governments to influence education policy provides a genuine chance to render schools more attentive to their communities' cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic conditions.

Yet these ideal remains to be fully achieved. In my experience working with local municipalities and schools, I have seen first-hand the very issues that Schaffner et al. (2024) describe: limited human resource capacity, fragmented policy implementation, and unrestrained political interference. Local governments themselves lack both technical capacity and institutional support to implement successful educational programs. Additionally, the dependence on international funding, as highlighted by Mehendale (2020), means that local autonomy is more theoretical than real. Policies and reforms designed to fit international standards may not necessarily connect with the immediate priorities and lived experiences of Nepali teachers and students.

The doctrine of federalism, Bulmer (2017) argues, does offer a foundation for responsive and inclusive government, especially in diverse societies like our own. Federalism itself, though, will not automatically result in improved educational outcomes. What is required is a parallel commitment to building local administrative capacity, ensuring that funding will follow function, and establishing mechanisms to hold schools and local authorities accountable. These are not simply technical adjustments; they are crucial to turning decentralization into serious reform. With all this in consideration, I am cautiously optimistic. Nepal's federalism can still be revolutionary, but we must recognize that it takes time to change systems. With sustained dedication to developing local capacity and negotiating global norms with local realities, we can come nearer to delivering quality, equitable education to all corners of the country.

The decentralization of education policy in Nepal, while ambitious and well-intentioned, has a wide spectrum of issues that touch my personal experience and

observation of working in the education sector in Nepal. The 2015 Constitution and the Local Government Operation Act, 2074 established a basis upon which the local governments are called upon to steer school education at the helm. This, in theory, ought to facilitate policies that are more responsive, context-sensitive, and inclusive. The reality on the ground, however, is a very wide gap between intention and practice.

One of the most pressing challenges is the lack of precise coordination between the federal and local governments. Dhakal's (2019) point about the confusion in policy sequencing - whether local governments should wait for federal guidelines or act independently - is something I've encountered frequently in discussions with municipal education officers and school leaders. This uncertainty hampers timely and effective policymaking and causes frustration among local stakeholders who want to bring about meaningful change but lack clear direction. Just as worrisome is the breakdown in communication pointed out by Budhathoki (2018). Initiatives such as the School Improvement Plan (SIP) tend to fail because primary stakeholders - headteachers, teachers, SMC members, and PTA representatives - either fail to comprehend their roles or have inadequate skills and confidence to drive such programs. I've witnessed schools whose staff and communities are highly motivated, yet without effective training or information, they fail.

Decentralization is not so much a matter of delegating power as it is a matter of empowering people at the grassroots level with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to succeed. It takes more than a law, investment in human capital, an effective communications strategy, and true partnership at the local levels of government and within the community. And yet, I firmly believe that decentralization can still change Nepal's education system. But we must first prioritize capacity building at the local level, make policy communication rational, and cultivate learning and accountability cultures. Only then can we convert the promise of decentralization to actual benefit for our schools and students.

The inequity issue and access in Nepalese education is highly troubling, especially in terms of social justice and inclusion. As an educational worker, I am continuously witnessing how structural inequalities continue to keep at a disadvantage those who require education the most - the poor communities, ethnic minorities, and rural girls. Gurung (2022) is correct to note that even with several laws, policy goals, and social

inclusion initiatives, the latter has been unsuccessful in transforming lived realities for marginalized social groups. Increased divergence between private and public education is one of the most visible displays of inequality. Faster privatization has created an alternate system - an alternate system serving the rich but hurting public schools, often the sole option for the poor, which are inadequately equipped and neglected. The marketization of education has made quality learning a commodity rather than a right and has widened social divisions rather than narrowing them.

Language policy in education presents another layer of exclusion. With over 120 languages spoken across Nepal, the dominance of a single language in schools is both politically motivated and pedagogically problematic. K.C. (2020) and Poudel & Choi (2022) make it clear that children whose mother tongues are ignored in classrooms often feel alienated and struggle to thrive academically. I've seen how these language barriers erode confidence and limit the potential of students, particularly in ethnolinguistically diverse communities. The push for English-medium education driven by economic aspirations often seems more performative than practical, especially when it comes at the cost of foundational learning in early education, as Early & Cummins (2011) and Phyak (2016) explain.

Missing is a sincere commitment to equity - one that transcends policy platitudes and extends to the classroom level. Continued investment in public schools, specialized teacher training, curriculum development that is inclusive, and multilingual teaching that values Nepal's linguistic diversity is all required. Equity in education is not supposed to be a privilege; it has to be a right for all, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, or language. In the coming years, I believe that Nepal must reform its priorities - prioritizing marginalized students at the center of education reform, valuing linguistic diversity as a strength, and investing in the public education system as a driver of national development and solidarity. Otherwise, inequality will continue to erode the transformative power of education.

Reading the current experiences of policy implementation and stakeholder engagement in Nepal's education sector resonates deeply with my personal field experiences. Despite progressive policies and constitutional guarantees, an overbearing disconnect persists between paper-level promises and classroom-level realities. As Regmi (2024) and Shah and Brett (2021) point out, the top-down policymaking strategy

continues to disempower those most affected by such policies - students, teachers, and parents. From my own experience engaging with schools and local education authorities, I too often discover that grassroots people are uninformed regarding new policies or bereft of resources to enable them. This disconnection produces a long-standing cycle of misplaced intent and non-practice. Budhathoki's (2018) description of the misplaced devolution of school governance to communities is particularly valuable. Without resources or training, how can we ever expect educational institutions to be run effectively by communities? Dhakal's (2019) "top-top" strategy similarly refers to an inherent issue: educational policy tends to be elitist bargaining, donor coercion, and global agendas over the lived experience of Nepali classrooms. These policies might look great on paper but are not always the right fit for local schools' and communities' capacities and needs.

The failure to properly implement the Compulsory and Free Education Act 2075 is especially disappointing. The legislation guarantees free education, yet without the financial backing and systemic infrastructure to turn it into a reality, its impact is nil. That there is no budgetary provision, as discovered by NCE Nepal (2023), is a sobering reminder that political commitment alone is not enough - we need strategic planning, monitoring, and adequate investment.

Looking at these challenges now, I firmly believe that if Nepal's education system is going to change meaningfully, policy processes must become more inclusive. The teachers, the students, the parents, and the local administrators have to be involved at every stage -from policy development to monitoring outcomes. Local level capacity-building, as Neupane (2019) too noted, is not an option; it's a necessity. Building intergovernmental coordination, opening up transparency, and investing long-term in public education are the necessary steps ahead. Education reform will not succeed separated from the individuals who live it daily. It is only through bottom-up, inclusive policy-making and considerate, well-resourced implementation that we can hope to create an equitable and effective educational system for all Nepalis.

The idea of "free education" in Nepal is more of a constitutional promise than a practical reality. While the Constitution and the Compulsory and Free Education Act of 2075 promise each child free and compulsory education, the policy-practice deficit is stark. As someone intimately connected with the education community, I see every day

how such free education subtly charges economic fees on households—especially in rural and marginalized communities.

Ghimire's (2022) observation that public schools are forced to raise funds from parents and third parties is something I've witnessed first-hand. From enrollment fees masked as “voluntary donations” to the cost of uniforms, stationery, exams, and extra classes, the expenses add up. These unofficial costs make it difficult for low-income families to keep their children in school, contradicting the very spirit of inclusive and equitable education promised by our constitution. It is sad that no community school has been able to offer genuinely free education, as expressed by the Republica (2022). More disturbing is the lack of political will to address this contradiction. If the state is indeed committed to educational equality, it must back its commitment with proper funding, accountability, and system-wide reform. Such half-hearted measures not only harm confidence in public institutions but also continue to entrench poverty and exclusion of millions of children.

This reflection provides me with a sense of responsibility and urgency. We cannot allow "free education" to remain a myth any longer. There must be timely and sufficient investment in public education, coupled with policy implementation that is good faith and transparent. Only then can we fulfill the promises in our constitution and provide every Nepali child, regardless of their background, with an equal chance at a better future.

Conclusion

Nepal's educational system has made great strides to promote economic, social and cultural equity, inclusive and quality education for all citizens. Different policies to improve the education system have been implemented in Nepal, but numerous areas still need more attention and improvement. Monitoring and regular evaluation of education policies will be useful to determine the strengths, weaknesses, and possible areas of improvement. The education system of Nepal needs an integrated strategy for policymaking to address different issues. Compelling policy implementation needs increased investment in research and data collection, increased stakeholder engagement, ensuring equity of access to education, and increased investment in the education sector. As Nepal moves to federalism, Budhathoki (2018) claims the country is well-suited for correcting past errors. The Constitution of Nepal gave the local

government autonomy in policymaking, including in the education sector. Budhathoki (2018) emphasized that during the drafting of policies, local governments must, therefore, engage and negotiate with the local stakeholders, considering the local contexts, goals, and needs. The policymaking process should be done in such a way that a more comprehensive representation of grassroots stakeholders, such as students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and local education authorities, participate in the creation of education policies to ensure that they are driven by local knowledge. It is also now imperative to increase funding allocation, and accountability mechanisms at all levels of the education system. This includes the provision of adequate resources and support for local governments to effectively implement education policy and initiatives. It will also be necessary to revisit language policies and to monitor and evaluate the implementation of language policies.

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