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Original Research

Paradoxes in School Educational Policies and Practices: Equity in Chaos

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Abstract

This paper explores the paradoxes inherent within the intentions of Nepal's public education policies and their actual implementation in local communities. It looks specifically at Nepal's Constitutional Right to equitable quality education for socio-economically disadvantaged children. It highlights paradoxes in four major areas: 1) free and compulsory education, 2) equity and inclusion, 3) localizing education policies, and 4) the use of language in education, in the federal context of Nepal. To analyse school education policies and documents, we used participatory methods to generate data under the interpretive paradigm. More specifically, we held FGDs and interviews with women, Dalits, people with disability, indigenous groups, local governments, parents, teachers and students. The results show a number of significant paradoxes between the educational policies and the lived experiences of those in the local communities. The education policies deviate from the spirit of the Constitution and implementation is unsuccessful in delivering equitable education for all. A policy on paper does not guarantee equitable quality education and there are a number of questions that the government needs to consider to achieve the equity agenda.

Keywords: *Equity, Paradoxes, School Education Policies, Socialist Theory*

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Introduction

Paradox involves a contradiction between what is said and what is done; paradoxes are troublesome and of no benefit to educational practices; and they make us stop in our stride and force us to review our plans and prejudices (Lovlie, 2008). Likewise, Kuzich et al. (2015) assert that paradoxes juxtapose the idealised intentions of sustainable policies against the everyday reality of the education provided in schools and overcoming these paradoxes requires no less than a full transformation of school culture, policies, and practices. Additionally, Lewis (2000) asserts that paradoxes often contain contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously. This research aims to review equity related educational policies across the various levels of government in Nepal and expose the paradoxes within policies and practices that inhibit the achievement of educational equity in Nepal. The paradoxes are presented in two major dimensions: 1) contradictions between educational policies and equity policies as suggested by Lewis (2000); and 2) contradictions between what is committed in policy and delivered in practice as suggested by Lovlie (2008) and Kuzich et al. (2015).

Public school educational policies of Nepal address equitable quality education which has emerged as a central challenge in implementing educational policies. Equity is defined as equal opportunities, equal treatment and equal results for all in education (Castelli et al., 2012) and the success of equitable education policies is measured in two ways: a) the extent to which the education provided is sufficient and adequate; and b) the extent to which the educational systems guarantee success for all, including minority groups (Levin, 2003 as cited in Castelli et al., 2012). Nepal has prioritized equity by developing the Consolidated Equity Strategy for the School Education Sector which strategically focuses on three equity areas: meaningful access, meaningful/functional participation, and meaningful learning outcomes (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2014). The strategy has also identified eight dimensions of equity: gender, socio-economic status, geographical location, health and nutrition status, disabilities, caste and ethnicity, language, and children of vulnerable groups. Together, these equity areas and dimensions of equity are meant to strengthen educational achievement and equity for all students within the education system (MoE, 2014). However, as we demonstrate throughout this article, the strategy is dependent on minimal incentives (scholarships) and insufficient funding, plans and

actionable mechanisms to achieve equity in education (Bagale and Sapkota, 2015). The educational system in Nepal is rife with paradox and at its core the educational policy, developed based on child rights to achieve equitable quality education, and contradicts with actual equity measures, programmes and plans envisioned to implement the policy.

This paper presents evidence of paradoxes between policies and practices related to equitable quality education. The policy development and implementation processes are important to look at the realities of partnerships and coordination with stakeholders to avoid any contradictions (Winther-Schmidt & Shrestha, 2020). Likewise, lack of consultations with stakeholders and dearth of understanding of ground realities has led to the policies with less effective in implementation (Dhakal, 2019). Hence, we reviewed the following global and national documents, which each include commitments to equitable quality education: a) Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) 2015, b) Constitution of Nepal 2015, c) Local Government Operation Act 2074 of Nepal, d) National Education Policy 2076 of Nepal, e) Act Relating to Free and Compulsory Education 2075 of Nepal, f) School Sector Development Plan (2016–2023) of Nepal, and g) Consolidated Equity Strategy for the School Education Sector of Nepal 2014.

Theoretical Framework: Equity in Education

The major phenomena of inquiry in this paper are grounded on the reality of Nepal and are pertinent issues to be explored to ensure equitable quality education for all. Underpinning our understanding of education in Nepal is the 4As Education Framework developed by Tomasevski (2001) which refers to 1) Availability, 2) Accessibility, 3) Acceptability, and 4) Adoptability. The ‘4As’ were originally developed in 1966 by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and were further developed by Katarina Tomasevski, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education between 1988-2004. She expanded the visibility of the ‘4As’ around children and schooling, with a focus on human rights to education. In the 4As Education Framework, “Availability” connotes that schools are available for all children and the State is responsible for investments in education to ensure they are available to all; “Accessibility” is that schools are guided by non-discrimination and respect international human rights principles; and “Acceptability” and

“Adoptability” are how education systems and schools accept and include diversity in the classroom. The 4As Education Framework views the government as obligatory to secure human rights for their people and articulates education as a human right. This paper asserts that the Government of Nepal (GoN) is the primary responsible agency to ensure that education in Nepal is available, accessible, acceptable and adoptable, to ensure equitable quality education for all.

This paper is also built on the foundation of the socialist theory of education as Hans Hermann Hope (2011) which asserts that the State has control over the provision of social services, including education. Education is taken as a public good without any forms of exclusions. Hope (2011) asserts that when the State controls social goods like health and education, they should not allow private ownership in those areas. Education is a “socially” owned and distributed service by the state for the welfare of people and no person or group of people are allowed to control it. Additionally, Hope (2011) contends that policies are to be generated among the public and for the public welfare. The State is responsible for distributing those services to the public to achieve equality of opportunities. If the state fails to provide educational services to its people considering the issues of marginalization, as a result, paradoxes emerged between what is committed in policy and practice. Hence, the socialist theory of Hope is important to underpin Nepal’s commitment to equitable quality education as a State responsibility from a policy and practice perspective.

The 4As education framework of Tomasevski (2001) and the socialist theory of education of Hope (2011) complement each other to analyse paradoxes on ‘free and compulsory education’, ‘equity and inclusion’, ‘localizing education policies’, and ‘the use of language in education’. More specifically, education access, investment in education, non-discrimination, diversity and equity in education are analysed using the 4As education framework of Tomasevski (2001). Additionally, analysing education as social service, state’s control over social service, and state’s responsibility to ensure equitable quality education like Hope (2011) claims, adds value to this paper. This is also reinforced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which declares that providing free and compulsory equitable quality education is the State’s responsibility and education is a fundamental right, and the State has the main role in fulfilling education for their people (United Nations [UN], 1948).

Interpretive Research Approach

The study used the interpretive research approach to understand paradoxes in existing education policies and practices, which helped to generate meaning. A systematic review of national and education-specific policies and related documents was the dominant approach and by reviewing policies, we gain understanding about the intentions of government to ensure equitable access to quality education. Then, comparing how the policies are put into practice, we can uncover paradoxes that are preventing Nepal from achieving educational equity for socio-economically disadvantaged children. The information generated from the review of education policies and related literature was then classified, summarized, and grouped into themes.

Additionally, the study also included ten Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with five-seven participants and ten individual interviews with women, Dalits, people with disability, indigenous groups, local governments, parents, teachers and students in the districts of Jhapa, Parsa, Kathmandu, Parbat, Palpa, Dailekh and Bajura. FGDs and interviews were used to better understand their collective views on equity-related educational practices and the implementation status of equitable quality education, based on the key themes of inquiry. This technique ensured that the lived experiences and expertise of the primary stakeholders was reflected in our results and provided important lived, real-life context for the theoretical analysis using paradoxes in policy and practice. Both rural and urban areas of the districts and communities were purposefully selected for both FGDs and interviews to ensure diverse perspectives. The data and information obtained from both the FGDs, and interviews were transcribed and triangulated with the themes found in the policy reviews.

The secondary data sources reviewed in this study were collected for use only within this study. The data from the FGDs and interviews were all collected on a voluntary basis and kept confidential. The researchers have a master list of participant's names, and this is kept in locked file drawers. No individuals are cited by name in the research.

This paper explores educational policy and practice paradoxes and explores how these paradoxes result in an inability to achieve equitable quality education of socio-economically disadvantaged children in Nepal. Using both primary and secondary

data, this paper attempts to answer two research questions related to education policy and practice paradoxes: a) how the national education policies of Nepal address the nexus of right to equitable quality education; and b) how the principles of policies adopted into practice improve quality education access of socio-economically disadvantaged children. The analysis has been divided into four main paradox categories: 1) Free and Compulsory Education, 2) Equity and Inclusion, 3) Localizing Education Policies, and 3) Use of Language in Education.

The Paradoxes Within Education System

The first dimension of analysis showed the paradox between various policies including: a) after the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal 2015, it was assumed that there would be a radical shift towards providing equitable quality education to all. The Constitution envisions that access to education will address and impact the issues of equity (GoN, 2015). The School Sector Development Plan (2016–2023) and the National Education Policy 2076 were developed to fulfil the Nepal Government's commitment to equitable quality education but these policies have not clearly articulated mechanisms, methods, steps, actions, plans, or budgets to address inequity; b) likewise, the Constitution has given Local Governments the right to develop necessary Acts and policies so as to manage the areas that are under its jurisdiction, as per Schedule 8 of the Constitution. Within the jurisdiction of Local Government, the Constitution has provided an obligatory framework that makes local governments responsible for about 22 different, exclusive functions including overall management of the basic and secondary education systems, in an attempt to keep accountability localized (GoN, 2017). However, the Local Government Operation Act 2074 does not explicitly mention that local government is responsible for secondary education; and c) to realize constitutional commitments to free and compulsory education to all, the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education has been developed and education policy has committed to allocating 20% of the budget to education. However, the budget for education has gradually been decreased. In fiscal year 2010/11, it was 17.11% and by 2017/18 it had shrunk to 9.91% (National Campaign for Education Nepal [NCEN], 2018). Currently, in fiscal year 2021, the education budget is 10.9% of the overall budget (GoN, 2021). This shows that the education budget is far lower than the 20% committed in policy to strengthening the public education system in Nepal. This is an important and foundational paradox in educational policies.

The second dimension of analysis explores the paradox between policy and practice including: a) the Local Government Operation Act 2074 has required that planning and implementation of policies be participatory and inclusive, and considers equity (GoN, 2017). However, this contradicts with the practices of local government in operationalizing these policies. There is weak participation of local people, particularly from marginalized communities in local government's educational policies and program activities (Karki, 2019); b) despite the existence of education policies which are meant to improve the lives of communities, the paradox in policy and practice has resulted in undermining the educational rights of people (Dhungana, 2019). This includes undermining people's rights to access to free quality public education without discrimination and inequality (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016); c) Bhusal (2018) asserts that there is a lack of access to quality education, poor investment in education, high inequality, poor governance, and frequent political interference in the education system and governance in Nepal. Likewise, Sharma et al. (2019) highlights that there are contradictions between Nepal's stated constitutional commitment to equal access when devising, planning and implementing educational policies and what happens in practice; and d) the policy paradox is again seen when citizen participation in institutional decision making processes is denied, despite major policies, including Constitution of Nepal 2015, requiring wider public participation for increased accountability of government at all governmental levels (Bhusal, 2018).

From the FDGs and interviews, we found evidence in two broad categories of how stakeholder groups: a) understand the right to equitable quality education; and b) understand education policy implementation and see implementation happening in their communities. In the FDGs and interviews in Jhapa, Kathmandu and Parba districts, the participants share their understanding of quality education:

If our children can speak English fluently, we consider that they are getting quality education. If they have quality education, they can get prestigious jobs and can be doctors, engineers, government officers, teachers, and so on, and earn money. The children with quality education get opportunities to study abroad in the countries like America, United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, and other developed countries.

Additionally, the participants of FGDs and interviews in Palpa, Parsa, Bajura and Dailekh districts highlight:

We have heard that there are a lot of policies in education, but we don't know the provisions for different groups of children which support to continue their education. We have no ideas of implementation of those policies. We are also not clear on the roles of parents, communities and other stakeholders in implementing those policies. The Government should make communities aware of those policies and support schools for the implementation without any discrimination so that children from marginalized communities can have equal access to quality education.

The FDGs and interviews provided a collective view and insight from different stakeholders on rights to equitable quality education and the State's role to ensure equity in education like Tomasevski (2001) asserts. The interviews and FGDs also allowed for deeper perspectives of people on the right to equitable quality education and state's roles to provide education for all without any forms of discrimination like Hope (2011) contends.

The Paradox of Free and Compulsory Education

The GoN has ratified more than two dozen international human rights frameworks including the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1986. These human rights instruments advocate for providing free and compulsory primary education for all. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 is aligned with these frameworks. It is the main legislative framework in Nepal that ensures free and compulsory education for all up to a basic level and free education up to secondary.

In order to activate the constitutional intentions to become reality, the Free and Compulsory Education Act 2075 was enacted to provide resources including free textbooks, free admission and enrolment, meals, scholarships, and special provisions for education materials and health services to the children from economically deprived families and children with disabilities. This confirms that, like Hope (2011) claims, the principles of providing education are the responsibility of the State, and Nepal's educational policies demonstrate their responsibility for education, to provide, regulate, control and monitor education. However, free and compulsory education of

the most marginalized children are not sufficiently powered by these provisions. The Dalit children in an FDG in Dailekh district share:

We need to pay tuition fee, exam fee, fee for extracurricular activities and other charges. Schools do not allow us to take part in the exams if we are not able to pay fees. The scholarship provided by school is not even sufficient to buy dress and stationery.

The above evidence supports, and Action Aid (2017) claims that despite the constitutional and legal provisions of providing free and compulsory education, students and parents need to pay fees under different headings. Similarly, the research conducted by NCEN (2018) shows that 75% of students pay for their education directly or indirectly.

Similarly, the Free and Compulsory Education Act has been developed to provide policy that will ensure the constitutional provision of the State's role to provide free and compulsory education. Paradoxically, the right to education is challenged by growing privatization in Nepal resulting to the widened socio-economic segregation (NCEN, 2016). The State policy of allowing privatization in education has resulted in a policy environment where private schools are run like profit-oriented businesses, collecting fees from parents (Adhikari, 2019). Hence, the constitutional provision of ensuring free and compulsory education paradoxically contradicts with the policy allowing and promoting profit-oriented private schools.

The paradox in policy to provide free and compulsory education but in practice to promote private education has resulted in challenges to ensure the availability and accessibility of public education as committed by the GoN, like Tomasevski (2001) asserts. In practice, private education does not ensure availability of education, as around 41.4% of all private schools are concentrated in and around the urban areas and they serve the richest quantile of population (Bhatta & Budathoki, 2013). Parents are keen to send their children to private schools because of the socially constructed perception that only the children from lower economic status and poor families go to public schools (Bhatta & Budathoki, 2013). Parents in an FGD in Parbat district share:

We are compelled to send our children in private schools due to social pressure. If we do not send our children to private school, we are considered as uneducated and unaware of importance of education. Some of the parents feel economically

underprivileged and marginalized due to social pressure. We feel bad when we are blamed as if we are not aware of importance of education.

Around, 60.1% of children from the richest income quintile currently enrolled in school/college attend private institutions, compared to only 6.4% from the poorest quintile (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2011). This again reinforces the paradox of the Government's commitment to ensure equity in education like Chinapah & Odero (2016) claim that quality education is human rights of individual and it needs to be provided by state to all children, youth and adults as per their needs and expectation.

Private schools have also become valued as a social differentiator, which makes public school stigmatization, a long-term concern for education systems (Joshi, 2016). This has resulted in inequality between girls and boys, as parents who cannot afford for schooling for all their children, choose boys to be sent to private school. Privatization has also contributed to a stark digital divide imposed by the current COVID-19 pandemic, with online and virtual classes benefitting only those with digital access (NCEN, 2020). Only 13% of schools have facilities to access the internet and only 55% of households have access to the internet at home (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2020). This digital divide has created further inequity in education, again showing that the fundamental right of every citizen to receive free and compulsory quality education has been compromised because of contradiction in the Government's policies and practices. Rani (pseudonym) of Parsa district, attended one of the interviews and shared:

I will not be able to continue my study if I don't get free and compulsory education. I need to support my mother in household chores, collect fodders, graze animals and take care of my sisters and brothers. So, I do not get sufficient time to study and complete my homework. I even miss my regular classes at school.

It is clear that the existence of a GoN policy stating the commitment to free, equitable, and quality education is in paradox with practices in education and is not resulting in greater access to education. And the most seriously impacted are those for whom the policy is meant to support – those who are disadvantaged and marginalized communities who lack the financial ability to pay fees, access private schools, and obtain necessary digital tools. This reaffirms that, like Hope (2011) contends, the state

not only provisions right to education in policy but also provides education services to its people without any forms of discrimination to avoid paradoxes.

The Paradox of Equity and Inclusion

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 guarantees that every human being, irrespective of their caste, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, or any other background enjoys their right to access quality education which is specifically termed as a fundamental human right. Additionally, Nepal ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) in 2010 which guarantees equitable quality education. The GoN has promulgated the Consolidated Equity Strategy 2014 to ensure equity in access, participation and learning outcomes (MoE, 2014). However, still, children from marginalized communities and groups are kept out of schools.

In the context of Nepal, the disparity and discrimination to access to education, on the basis of class, ethnicity, region and gender have been the major challenge in ensuring the right to education at a grassroots level (Devkota & Bagale, 2015). The equal enrolment of girls and boys in school has not been achieved. Instead, in practice, most of the boys in families are admitted to private schools and girls are sent to public schools. However, girls are also further held back as they often can only attend school after the completion of all household chores (NCEN, 2016). This has further created gender and economic segregation in society despite the Constitutional commitment of the GoN to non-exclusion and non-discrimination in accessing educational opportunities. A girl in an interview in Bajura district shares:

I want to go to school with my brother. However, I am sent to public school and my brother to boarding (private) school. This makes me unhappy, and I do not know why we are sent to different schools. I also feel insecure while going to school alone.

Nepal has a strong legal and policy framework to support equitable education and has made significant steps to institute these policy commitments by formulating the Equity Strategy and establishing the Equity Index. Paradoxically, however, effective implementation of these policies and laws to date has been challenging due to 1) inadequate data and evidence to support impactful inclusive education programming, 2) limited institutional and technical capacity, and 3) entrenched discriminatory

practices against gender, disability, and caste/ethnicity (NCEN, 2016). The Dalit community during an FGD in Parsa district shares:

There are some challenges we face to continue our children's education: a) we feel unsafe for sending our daughters to go to school because of an incident of acid attack three months ago to a girl from our community; b) our daughters are badly treated in school due to being Dalit girls; c) our children are beaten and scolded by teachers when they fail to answer the questions asked by teachers; and so on.

The above evidence and a study by NCEN (2018) show that children in Nepal are subjected to multiple forms of discrimination including gender, caste, ethnicity, socio-economic status, family background, physical abilities and even religion in some cases. This violates the right to equity in education and is paradoxical to what the GoN commits in policy to ensure equity. The discrimination happening for children in educational settings is vastly different from what is explicitly stated in official educational policy.

The Constitution and GoN education policies also mention the 4a's (availability, accessibility, acceptability and adoptability). However, children with disabilities lack disability-friendly schools, girls lack appropriate toilets and are subjected to gender-based violence in school (NCEN, 2017). Likewise, the economically disadvantaged students are neglected, a frequently absent from school, and as a result fail the school exams (Dhungana, 2019). The weaker students in the classroom are subjected to discrimination and multiple forms of violence. The children with disabilities shared this in an FGD in Parbat district:

We face problems in Mathematics lessons when it comes to understanding pictures and visual presentation in the classroom. There are no sufficient facilities for us like no proper ramp, toilets, assistive devices, Braille scrip and so on. We are also studying in the same class even if we are more than 13 years old. We should get opportunity to progress in our education.

The government's policy to create an inclusive and equitable environment for learning, for all students irrespective of gender, caste, economic background and academic performance, is in paradox with what is actually happening in schools. The above situation is paradoxical with the constitutionally provisioned educational rights of children with disability. Additionally, the only widely understood accessibility

standard for schools is to have a ramp in their main entrance, which is not sufficient to ensure access for the wider range of types of disabilities.

The GoN's policy and plans also recognize sexual and gender minorities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) communities, however, support for LGBTQ students is lacking and educational attainment for these students is not easy. During an interview, Pinky (pseudonym), a LGBTQ youth shares:

Teachers are not well trained to support LGBTIQ students in schools and school environments are not supportive for LGBTIQ children like me who cannot complete our education. When I share, I am lesbian, my colleagues, teachers and community people make fun out of it, and I feel embarrassed in such situation.

The 4A Framework of Tomasevski (2001) again asserts that the State is responsible for policy development and delivery to ensure accessibility in education/schools. This is guided by principles of non-discrimination and respect for international human rights principles. Acceptability and adoptability are directly connected to how educational settings/schools accept diversity. However, the above examples show that there are paradoxes in Nepal about what is committed in policies and delivered on the ground. The GoN has made policy commitments to delivering an education that is equitable and inclusive for all students, without any form of discrimination but the implementation remains weak.

The Paradox of Centralization and Localizing Education Policies

The 2030 agenda of the SDGs envisions free and compulsory equitable quality education for all, and these policy commitments are to be achieved through developing local policies and plans that are context specific but aligned with the spirit of SDGs (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). Similarly, according to the Constitution of Nepal, education is managed by Federal, Provincial, and Local Governments. However, the Acts and Policies developed at the national level have not been localized and even the local policies are not disseminated to the people who are the local rights holders (Karki, 2019). The Local Government Operation Act 2074 is meant to facilitate local governments in delivering constitutional provisions, including management of education. However, the Act does not specifically mention the roles of local government regarding secondary education. This has created contradictions with the Constitution as the Constitution directs local governments to manage education, up

to the secondary level (Paudel & Sapkota, 2018). Indigenous group participants in a FGDs in Jhapa district highlight:

The Local Government Operation Act 2074 is not serious on right to education as it allows and promotes private education making them easy to register. It also allows to open tuition and coaching centres which is another form of business in education. Children from rich family go to private schools and we send our children to public schools. This is a discrimination for us.

In the FGDs with women in Jhapa and Bajura, the participants highlighted that they have not been involved in the policy formation processes for central education policies. Despite the direction for consultation and involvement at a local level, they had also not been invited to participate in developing the local education policies formed by the local governments. Additionally, the participants shared that the local governments have not been able to complete their duties and responsibilities in developing local plans and processes as they lack capacity in designing local curriculums and systems for Grade 8 examinations. Additionally, due to conflicting roles between the District Education Unit and the local government there is confusion over local and central policies and responsibility. As a result, the policy processes are not participatory.

In contrast, local governments in FGDs in Jhapa, Kathmandu, Dailekh and Bajura claim that they have involved communities in local education policy formation processes. The local governments, however, realized that they lacked capacity and resources to ensure practices enacted the right to education.

The above evidence contradicts what Tomasevski (2001) highlights is needed for making education services available to meet local needs, that the State is responsible for investing resources in education to ensure educational settings and schools adopt education which accepts diversity and the diverse needs of disadvantaged children. However, in Nepal, there is less investment in education, very limited resources, but instead multiple expectations that schools will simply implement those expectations in practice (Dhungana, 2019).

Additionally, federalization of education policies without clear guidelines has added much more tension among the governments on generating domestic resources (Shah, 2016). The implementation of the SDGs, and their localization, together with

transition into a federal republic nation, financial resources will be much more limited to achieve SDGs, as federalism requires a huge transitional cost (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2017). Despite the need for a substantially increased education budget, the education budget of the GoN has declined steadily from 16.6% in 2011/12 to only 10.9% in 2021/22 (MoF, 2020). This paradox reflects an increased budget and resource need to allow for effective and practical local implementation of policies, with a continually shrinking education budget.

Policy localization also involves providing decision making authority to the local educational staff including allowing them to make, execute, and monitor policy to ensure it is addressing the local needs of disadvantaged communities (Nur, 2013). The paradox lies between the State's role in involving and empowering local communities to localize and practice policies while developing more policies that are without the funds and authority to enact locally.

The Paradox of the Use of Language in Education

Nepal is a multilingual country with more than 125 linguistic groups (CBS, 2011) which can be seen in the public-school classrooms. The GoN has developed different policies in order to ensure the linguistic rights of children in education. For example, Constitution of Nepal 2015 commits to provide basic education in each child's mother tongue, as a medium of instruction. Similarly, the National Education Policy 2076, the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016, the Act Relating to Free and Compulsory Education 2075, the Local Government Operation Act 2074, and the National Curriculum Framework describe promoting multilingual education in Nepal. However, the emphasis given to the Nepali language marginalizes the children from linguistic minority groups. Members of the ethnic groups from Palpa district, in an FDG share:

Nepali is not our first language, and our children do not often speak Nepali at home. Our children find it difficult to follow when teachers explain in Nepali. Children from our community drop out from the schools due to linguistic difficulties they faced in schools.

There is an over reliance on Nepali language in the classrooms of Nepal despite the various commitments to multilingual education in multiple policy documents and plans. The GoN has paid only weak attention to implementing multilingual education.

There are inadequate teacher trainings, lack of learning materials, and not enough programs of awareness for stakeholders in order to implement the multilingual education in public schools (Rai, 2018).

Despite the constitutional provision and policy measures to ensure a child's right to receive basic education in their mother tongue, including curriculum and medium of instruction, this is not happening in practice. United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] (2018) notes that there are over two million children who cannot speak the Nepali language and they are unable to learn meaningfully in schools as there are monolingual Nepali-only educational practices in most of schools of Nepal. According to teachers during a FGD in Parsa district:

It is difficult to explain all the subjects in students' mother tongue. We do not have that capacity and we lack training opportunities. Due to the difficulty in understanding mathematics in Nepali language, many students often failed in mathematics and science subjects as Nepali is not their mother tongue.

In contrast, the GoN has also attempted using English language in public schools as the medium of instruction (MoEST, 2016). Many of the local governments have started to use English as the priority language in public schools, for both the teaching learning activities and in the form of specific courses/subjects. Many schools have policies and practices of introducing English curriculum in schools instead of another local culture and minority language/s (NCEN, 2018). The GoN has also accepted the existence of private schools which promote English as the medium of instruction and using textbooks which are mostly in English.

The policies commit to using mother tongue education and yet, paradoxically, Nepali and English language education, in the form of textbooks or subjects or medium of instruction, has become the normal educational practice. This has led to chaos in the role of the State to provide education as a social service, as highlighted by Hope (2011). Additionally, the role of the government is to protect and promote local and context-based culture and provide enabling environments to for students to exercise their right to education (Tomasevski, 2001). Promoting only national Nepali language in public schools and English language in private schools has not positively contributed to delivering the government's constitutional commitment in promoting mother tongue-based education. The contradiction of Government's policy

commitment and practice challenges the ability to promote the linguistic rights and education of children from marginalized and indigenous communities.

Conclusion

Despite constitutional and global commitments of the GoN to ensure equitable quality education, the education policies and programmes developed to realize those commitments tend to reinforce paradoxes. These paradoxes have prevented Nepal from succeeding in implementing an equitable education agenda, in four keyways. First, the policies remain vague without clearly delineating levels of responsibility, authority, and clear actionable plans to achieve the equity agenda and improve education for socio-economically disadvantaged children. Second, there are many contradictions between policies. For example, articulation within education policies of the right to free and compulsory education deflects from the Constitutional commitment of considering education as social goods. Third, there are paradoxes between policies and practices. For example, the equity focusses of the Consolidated Equity Strategy for the School Education Sector which is focussed on meaningful access, meaningful/functional participation, and meaningful learning outcomes contradicts the implementation mechanisms which is not clear on localizing it with clear actions, capacities, authorities, and sufficient financing, etc. Fourth, the evidence provided through the interviews and FGDs highlight the perspectives of citizens and their experiences with free and compulsory education, equity and inclusion, localizing policies, and the use of language in education. It is clear that how people experience education is completely paradoxical to what government commits to in policies. The practices on the ground do not match with what is promised and reflect a lack of progress, action, and practice that upholds and delivers on Constitutional commitments.

This raises some serious questions for the GON to explore. How should the private education sector run in Nepal? What should the GoN do to regulate private education? How should the private education sector contribute to ensure achievement of the equity agenda? How should education be treated as a public good in Nepal? How does a centralized policy process address the inequity issues in local education? Why are centralized education issues necessary? Does the education system demand centralization or localization and how does it relate to global commitments of

localizing policies? How do local, provincial and federal governments ensure equitable quality education?

The clear deviation from policy to praxis and between policies in attaining equitable quality education as a major finding of this paper opens further debates and provides a base for further research in other areas of educational policy and practice paradoxes. These paradoxes in education policy and practice have been major barriers to sustain focus on equitable quality education. If the paradoxes in education are not addressed, equitable access to quality education in Nepal will be difficult to achieve. Further development of policies may not help until we resolve the paradoxes that already exist in the educational system in Nepal.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors have declared that there are no conflicts of interest. The views, reflections and conclusions derived in the paper are the narratives concluded by the authors, based on the research findings, analysis, and interpretation, which do not represent the official views or perspectives of the organizations to which the authors are currently associated.

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