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e-Journal Site: <https://www.dsmc.edu.np/journal/>**School Education Management: Navigating Policy Intent and Local Managers' Practice in Federal Nepal****Dharma Jung Thapa****Abstract****Article History:**

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Gorkha, NepalEmail: [info@dsmc.edu.np](mailto:info@dsmc.edu.np)Website: [www.dsmc.edu.np](http://www.dsmc.edu.np)**Copyright:** Authors/ PublisherThis work is licensed under a  
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*The 2015 Constitution of Nepal restructured the nation into a federal republic, terminating the constitutional monarchy and unitary governance system. This transformation was intended to facilitate socioeconomic progress through decentralization and inclusion of education. However, the strategic adaptation of this system is fundamentally constrained by an interrelated system of barriers, where structural deficits, a legislative vacuum, and political interference have hindered the effective management of school education. This cycle systematically reconcentrates power and stifles local initiatives. This qualitative case study explores how education managers understand, interpret, and implement decentralized education policies in the management of school education in Nepal. Grounded in decentralization and federalism theories, this study*

*examines the tensions and innovations that arise between policy intentions and local-level implementation. Data were collected through interviews and participatory observations with 12 stakeholders, including a mayor, rural municipality chairs, and education officers from three strategically selected local governments. The analysis reveals local innovations, such as context-specific education policies and teacher training programs, while identifying significant challenges, including budget dependency, political interference, and weak intergovernmental coordination. The findings*

*suggest that centralist tendencies, incomplete policies, and fragmented institutions hinder effective decentralization. This study contributes to the debate on the need for clear, Constitution-aligned policies to support federal transition and ensure effective school management.*

**Keywords:** decentralization, federalism, educational management, policy implementation, local governance

## Introduction

Federalism, a governance model designed to balance power across central and regional authorities, has been constitutionally adopted by 25 countries, encompassing approximately 40 percent of the world's population (Wong, 2018), and is acclaimed for enhancing local autonomy, equity, and service efficiency (Shrestha & Venik, 2017; Tucker, 2011). In developed nations like the United States, it has supported stability and the rule of law (Rozel & Wilcox, 2019), while its implementation in education varies widely. Australia and Belgium, for instance, delegate authority to state or regional governments (OECD, 2011; Verin, 2006), whereas developing countries, such as Mexico, Ethiopia, and Nepal, face persistent challenges in aligning decentralized policies with local needs (Aryal, 2014; Wang et al., 2015). These disparities underscore the complexity of federal systems, particularly in reconciling policy aspirations with practical execution in the field (Thapa et al., 2026).

Nepal's education system reflects this tension well. Historically shaped by political changes, from the Rana regime to democratic reforms after 1990, the country has embraced decentralized governance and global initiatives such as Education for All (Khanal, 2010; Shah, 2016). The formal adoption of federalism in 2015 transferred education governance to 753 local governments, aiming to align schooling with community needs (Bhatta, 2014; Schaffner et al., 2020). However, challenges persist in empowering local levels and bridging the gaps between policy and practice (Kharel, 2017; Regmi, 2019). Schools in rural areas face difficulties owing to resource shortages, dependence on multi-tiered funding, and inconsistent policy implementation (Khanal & Regmi, 2023; Regmi, 2019). Headteachers and School Management Committees (SMCs) encounter obstacles such as political interference, lack of transparency, and fragmented coordination (Bhattarai, 2022; Shangraw, 2019).

Globally, federal education systems reveal both success and pitfalls. Developed nations, such as Germany, balance local autonomy with national standards but struggle with resource allocation (OECD, 2011). Nepal's shift to a federal governance system since 2015 has redefined education governance, emphasizing local autonomy (Daly et al., 2020). However, several studies by Khanal and Regmi (2023), Regmi (2019), Bhattarai (2022), and Shangraw (2019), which critically analyze Nepal's school education management landscape, have identified significant discrepancies between formulated education policies and

their real-world implementation, despite constitutional provisions. Although policies such as the Constitution of Nepal-2015 and Local Government Operation Act (2017) delegate authority to local levels in managing school education, the local levels experience dilemmas in enacting local education laws, hindered by centralized restrictions and capacity gaps (Wagle, 2019; Daly et al., 2020). Such inconsistencies risk undermining Nepal's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) ambitions, which prioritize education for all, inclusive education, literacy, and gender equality (BK et al., 2019).

Fiscal federalism theory posits that equitable resource distribution across governance tiers is critical for efficiency (Rao & Singh, 2005). However, Nepal's decade-long federal experiment highlights persistent disconnections. Fiscal federalism theory elucidates the structural dynamics of such systems by emphasizing three critical questions: (1) the optimal allocation of decision-making authority to local governments; (2) the alignment of responsibilities with funding mechanisms across governance tiers; and (3) the design of equitable intergovernmental transfer systems to reconcile disparities and achieve shared policy goals (Rao & Singh, 2005). While these frameworks provide a theoretical foundation for federal governance, their practical application, particularly in education, remains complex, especially in developing nations undergoing rapid decentralization. Nepal's decade-long federal experiment exemplifies these issues. Despite Nepal's 2015 constitutional policy provisions devolving school education management to local governments, scholarly investigations remain sparse and fragmented. Existing studies, such as those by Shangraw (2019), Daly et al. (2020), Khanal and Regmi (2023), and Thapa et al. (2026), highlight issues such as political interference, resource mismanagement, and weak institutional coordination. These studies indicate a disjuncture between constitutional aspirations and implementation failures and underscore the urgency of investigating local perspectives. These studies largely overlook the lived experiences of educational managers and stakeholders, the frontline actors tasked with interpreting and implementing policies. This gap obscures critical insights into how decentralization is perceived, practiced, and challenged at the grassroots level, limiting the potential to align federalism's promises with on-the-ground realities. In this context, the following research questions aim to delve into the perspectives, practices, and challenges of educational managers 'and stakeholders' in managing school education within Nepal's federal system by interrogating federal policy frameworks and grassroots practices in Nepal's education sector.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do educational managers and stakeholders perceive their roles, responsibilities, and efficacy in decentralizing school education policies at the local level?

2. What systemic and contextual challenges do these managers and stakeholders face when implementing policies at the local level?

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Underpinnings: Federalism and Decentralization in Education**

Federalism and decentralization in education are crucial areas of inquiry because of their implications for governance, policymaking, and educational equity. Federalism, as Elazar (1987) posits, is a structured system of power distribution across various tiers of government that ensures shared authority and collaboration. Scholars such as Wheare (1980) and Brand (2014) emphasize that federal structures evolve to balance national priorities with regional autonomy, a dynamic that shapes education policy. The theoretical underpinnings of federalism highlight its role in fostering participatory democracy and problem-solving (Ostrom, 1991; Acharya, 2014), making it an essential research area. In education, decentralization allows for local adaptation while maintaining overarching standards, ensuring both innovation and accountability (Aryal, 2014; Gyawali, 2018). However, the complexity of power distribution necessitates further investigation, particularly regarding how decentralized entities navigate educational mandates and fiscal responsibilities.

Despite its theoretical advantages, federalism presents several challenges in the education sector. Political and policy tensions continually shape its effectiveness, as seen in intergovernmental conflicts in the United States during the Trump Administration (Mabuhang, 2014). Comparative studies from the UK, Spain, and other nations indicate that decentralization often leads to jurisdictional disputes and inefficiencies (Cameron & Hofferbert, 1974). One key challenge is the balance between national educational standards and local flexibility, where regional disparities in funding and policy implementation may exacerbate inequities (Blöchliger et al., 2013). Additionally, federal education systems must contend with data standardization, intergovernmental cooperation, and fiscal disparities that impact equitable access to quality education (Manna & McGuinn, 2013). Addressing these complexities is crucial for improving decentralized education systems and ensuring that federalism enhances, rather than hinders, educational progress.

Existing studies underscore the benefits and limitations of federal education systems. Countries such as Canada, Italy, and the United States have implemented funding-transfer schemes to address regional fiscal disparities, with Australia adopting a needs-based approach to support disadvantaged students (Cameron & Hofferbert, 1974). Federalism allows for local experimentation, with successful models being scaled up nationally, as seen in the adaptation of innovative teaching practices across regions (Lauglo, 1995). However, decentralization may also lead

to inconsistencies in educational quality, as varying policies across jurisdictions create disparities among mobile families and marginalized communities (Acharya, 2014). Additionally, coordination between central and regional authorities can be slow, delaying educational reform efforts (Manna & McGuinn, 2013). Despite these challenges, federalism remains a viable framework for balancing localized educational needs with national policy objectives.

One of the critical drawbacks of decentralization in education is the potential for duplicating administrative structures, leading to inefficiencies and increased costs (Ostrom, 1991). Consolidating smaller administrative units could help optimize resources and improve service delivery, as evidenced by efforts in Germany and Switzerland to enhance regional coordination (Wong et al., 2021). Another issue is the fragmentation of data collection and accountability measures across the federal education systems. Countries such as Australia and Canada have attempted to standardize educational metrics to track student achievement and address disparities, particularly among Indigenous populations (Gyawali, 2018). Such efforts highlight the importance of coordinated federal policies in mitigating the adverse effects of decentralization and leveraging its benefits for innovation and local engagement.

### **Decentralization in Education Management**

The decentralization of education management has emerged as a critical issue due to its potential to enhance governance, accountability, and responsiveness in educational institutions. Scholars argue that decentralization facilitates decision-making at lower levels, fostering localized educational reforms and improving institutional efficiency (Iskakova et al., 2023). However, the literature reveals a paradox in which the transfer of authority does not always lead to improved outcomes, primarily because of challenges in implementation, capacity constraints, and coordination issues (Nurgaliyeva et al., 2022). The complexity of decentralization necessitates exploration of both its theoretical underpinnings and practical implications. While some studies highlight its role in empowering local actors and fostering innovation (DeBoer, 2012; Kozachenko, 2019), others caution against the risks of power imbalances, inefficiencies, and potential disparities in educational quality (Berdanova et al., 2019; Berdanova et al., 2021). This duality underscores the need for a nuanced examination of decentralization policies, particularly in diverse educational settings.

Key study challenges in this field revolve around the contextual variations in decentralization implementation, uneven resource distribution, and local actors' capacity to manage education effectively. For instance, Makoelle and Somerton (2019) examined how digital education technologies contribute to inclusive teaching and learning spaces, revealing that technology can bridge gaps in decentralized systems if adequately supported. Similarly, Mariono and Sabar (2023) investigated how school management information systems and teacher

social competence influence parent satisfaction, emphasizing the role of technological and human resources in effective decentralized education management. These studies highlight the necessity of integrating technological advancements and training mechanisms to mitigate the risks associated with decentralization. However, the literature remains fragmented, with insufficient empirical research on the long-term effects of decentralized governance on learning outcomes and institutional sustainability. Thus, future studies must address these gaps by adopting comparative and longitudinal approaches to assess decentralization efficacy across different educational systems.

Despite these challenges, decentralization offers significant opportunities for innovation, local responsiveness, and participatory governance in education. Nurkolis and Sulisworo (2018) explored how decentralization policies influence school effectiveness, arguing that well-structured decentralization fosters adaptability and localized problem-solving. Concurrently, Osorio and Banzato (2022) highlighted the transformative impact of digital technologies, suggesting that decentralization can drive pedagogical advancements when supported by robust technological infrastructure. However, issues such as disparities in resource allocation, governance inefficiencies, and technological accessibility persist, necessitating a balanced approach to policy implementation. Patrick et al. (2021) and Saienko et al. (2023) contributed to this discourse by examining European Union experiences and information society trends, offering valuable lessons on leveraging decentralization for educational advancements. Given these insights, further studies should focus on developing adaptive decentralization models that account for socio-economic and technological variations, ensuring equitable and effective education management in decentralized contexts.

### **Policy Pathways for School Education Management in Federal Context**

Nepal's transition to a federal governance system under the 2015 Constitution marked a pivotal shift in educational governance, decentralizing authority across federal, provincial, and local governments. The constitution enshrines education as a fundamental right, mandating free access up to the secondary level, and designates school management as a concurrent responsibility (Jha, 2019; Constitution of Nepal, 2015). The Government of Nepal, through the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, has introduced various policies, including the Higher Education Policy-2016, Inclusive Education Policy for Disabled People-2017, National Science and Technology Promotion Policy-2019, and National Education Policy-2019, to align with the evolving federal structure. Among these, the National Education Policy-2019 serves as the foundational roadmap for education policy in Nepal's federal context (MoEST, 2019). This policy, launched on December 11, 2019, seeks to harmonize the education system with constitutional mandates and the changing sociopolitical landscape. Bhattarai (2022) highlighted that school education management in Nepal is currently

governed by a combination of policy instruments, including the Education Act-1971, the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education-2018, Education Regulations-2002, and the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP). These legal and policy frameworks define the authority of the federal, provincial, and local governments, ensuring a decentralized approach to school education management. The broader discourse on decentralization and education management has been a topic of extensive global research, with mixed results regarding its effectiveness. Studies over the past decades have provided contradictory conclusions, leading to confusion among policymakers about the desirability and implementation of decentralization in education (Faguet, 2021). However, recent analyses have begun to provide clearer insights into the implications of decentralized education governance, thanks to advancements in empirical methodologies. In Nepal, the Constitution of Nepal-2015 firmly established education as a fundamental right and a shared responsibility across three levels of government: federal, provincial, and local (Gyawali, 2018). The constitution explicitly states that local governments hold primary authority over school education, as outlined in Schedule 8, which grants municipalities and rural municipalities the power to formulate and implement education policies tailored to local needs (Jha, 2019). While this constitutional provision promotes educational autonomy, Rijal (2019) emphasized that its practical implementation remains a challenge due to capacity gaps among local governments in policy execution.

The Local Government Operation Act-2017 serves as a crucial legislative mechanism for operationalizing decentralized education governance in Nepal. This act elaborates on the constitutional mandate by enumerating twenty-three key responsibilities assigned to local governments in managing basic and secondary education, including curriculum adaptation, school establishment, and financial oversight (MoE, 2017). Additionally, Rijal (2019) argued that while the Act empowers local governments with extensive decision-making authority, it also necessitates substantial administrative, financial, and managerial capacity building to ensure effective school management. The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016-2023 further reinforces this decentralized framework by promoting inclusive and equitable access to quality education. The SSDP envisions a transformative education system that integrates local stakeholders into decision-making processes, emphasizing the role of School Management Committees (SMCs) in resource allocation and school improvement initiatives (Bhattarai, 2022). However, challenges persist in aligning these local-level interventions with broader national educational goals, particularly in maintaining policy coherence amid diverse contextual realities.

The revised School Improvement Planning Support Manual-2017 emphasized the significance of locally driven school development strategies while maintaining alignment with national policies (MoE, 2017). Budhathoki (2023) noted that the SIP framework has facilitated greater stakeholder engagement,

leading to improvements in school governance and resource mobilization. However, persistent gaps in policy contextualization indicate that merely decentralizing authority is insufficient; effective implementation mechanisms are crucial for ensuring that policies translate into meaningful educational outcomes. Furthermore, the National Education Policy (2019) aims to modernize Nepal's education sector by enhancing technical and vocational education, regulating private schools at the local level, and integrating information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching and learning (Shrestha, 2019). Despite these progressive aspirations, concerns remain regarding financial sustainability and policy coherence in decentralized governance models.

## **Research Methods**

This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm to explore and analyze the perceptions and practices of local-level educational managers regarding school education management policies within Nepal's federal system. The study followed an interpretive research paradigm to analyze social actions from the perspectives of participants, aligning with Tracy's (2013) suggestion of understanding multiple realities. A qualitative approach was selected for its ability to capture contextual nuances and diverse stakeholder perspectives, as emphasized by Creswell and Poth (2017). This aligns with Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) advocacy of comprehensive qualitative depictions of social phenomena. A qualitative case study design was adopted to provide an in-depth exploration of stakeholders' perceptions and practices, as suggested by Nunan (2010). This approach enabled a focused examination of real-life educational management contexts at the local level. Stake (2013) supported case study research for its ability to offer contextual insights, while Yin (2018) highlighted the importance of analyzing multiple subunits within an embedded case study. Therefore, this study included various stakeholders—mayors, rural municipality chairs, education officers, school management chairs, head teachers, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) chairs, and education coordinators—to gain a holistic understanding of local school education management practices.

### **Participants**

This study employed purposive sampling to select 12 key stakeholders involved in local-level school education management within Nepal's federal system. Participants were chosen to ensure diverse perspectives, representing municipal and rural governance structures, education administration, and school leadership. The sample included mayors, rural municipality chairs, education officers, education coordinators, school management committee (SMC) chairs, parent-teacher association (PTA) chairs, and headteachers, each holding crucial decision-making roles in managing school education in Nepal. Geographical diversity was maintained by selecting participants from both urban and semi-

remote rural municipalities in the Gorkha District, Nepal. The participants' professional experience ranged from two to 15 years, allowing for a comparative analysis of perspectives across different levels of administrative and institutional responsibilities. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all the participants. The selection criteria prioritized individuals with substantial experience implementing education policies, addressing local governance challenges, and engaging with school communities. This diverse representation enhanced the study's capacity to capture nuanced insights into the realities of decentralized education management within Nepal's federal structure.

**Table 1*****Characteristics of the Participants***

Participant	Institution	Gender	Age Group	Work Experience
Mayor	Municipality	Male	50-60	2 yrs.
Chair of R. M.	R. M. - A	Male	40-50	6 yrs.
Education Officer	R. M. - B	Male	30-40	3 yrs.
Education Officer	R. M. - A	Male	20-30	4 yrs.
Education Officer	Municipality	Male	50-60	3 yrs.
Edu. Coordinator	R. M. - A	Male	50-60	4 yrs.
Headteacher	School - A	Male	50-60	15 yrs.
Headteacher	School - B	Male	40-50	10 yrs.
SMC Chair	School - A	Male	50-60	5 yrs.
SMC Chair	School - C	Male	40-50	3 yrs.
PTA Chair	School - A	Male	40-50	3 yrs.
PTA Chair	School - B	Male	40-50	3 yrs.

**Data Collection**

This study used purposive sampling to select 12 participants with diverse roles and experiences in school education management. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations conducted across semi-remote rural municipalities, an urban municipality, and three community schools. These interviews provided flexibility to probe deeper into participants' experiences, while observations offered contextual insights into their practices in managing school education at the local level. Various instruments, including interview guides, observation checklists, digital recording devices, smartphones, and journal entries were used to ensure comprehensive data collection. The selection of the Gorkha District, particularly areas affected by the 2015 earthquake, provides a unique context for understanding the challenges and adaptations in local-level school education management. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and local levels.

Grounded thematic analysis, based on the recommendations of Emerson (1981) and Neuman (2013), was employed to identify key patterns and insights from the data. The analytical process involved transcribing the interviews, conducting inductive coding using NVivo 10 software, and continuously comparing the data to ensure a systematic and rigorous interpretation. Direct participant quotes and observed practices were incorporated as evidence to support the identification of emerging themes related to challenges, policy implementation, and best practices in local-level school education management. This approach facilitated a coherent presentation of the findings, ensuring a thorough exploration of the realities within Nepal’s federal education system.

**Data Analysis**

This section presents the analysis and findings related to the research question: How do educational managers and stakeholders perceive their roles, responsibilities, and the efficacy of decentralized school education policies at the local level? What systemic and contextual challenges do these managers and stakeholders face when implementing policies at the local level? The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed key insights from diverse educational managers involved in school education management at the grassroots level in Nepal. A predominant theme among participants was the critical role of the Constitution of Nepal and the decentralization of authority to local governing bodies in shaping educational management.

**Table 2**

*Key Themes and Sub-themes in Local Education Managers’ Perceptions and Challenges in Federal Nepal*

<b>Main Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes / Descriptions</b>	<b>Illustrative Participant Support</b>	<b>Notes / Prevalence</b>
Positive perceptions of decentralization and local autonomy	Power-sharing and delegated authority under 2015 Constitution & LG Act 2017	√√√√	Strong, repeated
	Ability to create context-specific local education policies / acts	√√√	e.g., Village Education Act
	More accessible & participatory decision-making (no need to go to district HQ)	√√	Headteacher view
Local innovations and good practices	Formulation of local education acts / regulations	√√√	Confirmed on websites

Main Theme	Sub-themes / Descriptions	Illustrative Participant Support	Notes / Prevalence
	Development & implementation of local / tailored curriculum	√√√	Classes 1–5 in some RMs
	Teacher capacity building (ICT training, math, action research, orientation)	√√√	Ongoing programs
	Performance contracts, rigorous monitoring, teacher incentive allowances	√√	Motivation measures
	Additional local financial support (school grants, day meals, ECD teacher salary top-up)	√√√	Pro-poor / equity focus
Budget and resource dependency	Heavy reliance on federal/conditional grants for teacher salaries & core funding	√√√√√	Very strong
	Insufficient overall education budget at local level	√√√√	Repeated calls for increase
	Inadequate human resources / staffing shortages at local level	√√√	Manpower imbalance
Political interference	Political parties influence teacher recruitment, transfers, SMC formation	√√√√√	Very pervasive
	Blurring of education–politics boundary; pressure & vested interests	√√√√	Open secret
	Attempts by school leaders to manage / negotiate political pressure through dialogue	√√	Partial mitigation
Centralized mindset and resistance	Psychological resistance to full decentralization (esp. secondary education)	√√√	Persistent view
	Belief that local politicians lack capacity / fairness to	√√√	Especially secondary level

Main Theme	Sub-themes / Descriptions	Illustrative Participant Support	Notes / Prevalence
Weak intergovernmental coordination	manage education independently		Implementation barrier
	Entrenched centralist thinking among education staff & teachers	√√√	
	Ineffective / absent coordination between federal – provincial – local levels	√√√√	Major gap
External and structural influences	Lack of federal follow-up, orientation, or support for local staff transition	√√√	No questions asked
	Ambiguity & strategic silence from central government	√√	Policy vacuum
	Strong influence of international donors / foreign aid dependency	√√√	Shapes policy direction
	Political culture of the country affects education policymaking	√√	Systemic driver
	Growing influence of private schools & related organizations	√√	Emerging pressure

### Findings

Power-shared, Authority-delegated and Donor-influenced Education Management Policy

The education managers interviewed for this study shared that the decentralization of authority and decision-making power to local governments has significantly impacted school education management. For Example, an education officer stated:

Local authorities are now empowered to create the necessary laws, policies, and regulations to meet their needs. Local representatives and education officers can make plans for their level by assessing the schools' condition,

what can be improved there, what their financial resources are, and how many human resources they have.

The education officer expressed optimism, noting that local authorities, including elected representatives and education officials, now possess the autonomy to develop laws, policies, and regulations tailored to their communities' specific needs. This autonomy enables local authorities to evaluate various aspects of schools, such as infrastructure, financial resources, and human resources, allowing for more context-sensitive planning and implementation of education policies that reflect local realities.

Similarly, a participant headteacher expressed his understanding of the power-sharing policy of the current constitutional framework in managing school education as a democratic and participatory approach to governance and sustainable development. He reported:

I think the state has brought the current policy on school management in line with the ideological policy of power-sharing. The Local Government Operation Act-2074 was prepared to keep the desires and needs of the state and citizens in view. In the past, citizens had to go to the district headquarters for every job-related task. Now that rights and responsibilities have been acquired locally, things have become more accessible than before.

The headteacher's statement reveals that the current policy on school management has been aligned with the ideological policy of power sharing. The state is attempting to involve local communities in educational decision-making processes, which could lead to a more democratic and participatory approach to governance and sustainable development.

Furthermore, a participant education resource person of a Rural Municipality illustrated that despite the implementation of a federal system in Nepal, international donor agencies, the political culture of the country, and private organizations largely steer the creation of education-related policies and plans, exerting considerable influence from the center. He remarked:

Three factors have influenced the current school education management policies. First, if we depend on foreign donors for the budget needed for education management, external forces influence our education policy. The influence of foreign donors will remain until we can increase our country's education budget because investors expect self-interest and return. Second, the political culture and system of the country impact policymaking in any subject and area because politics is the state's policy. The political culture of a country determines policymaking. Third, the country's private schools and related organizations influence the country's school education management policy.

The above-mentioned remark of the education resource person indicates the significant external and internal influences on school education management

policy, emphasizing the dependency on foreign donors, political culture, and private school organizations (PSOs).

The analysis of insights from educational managers demonstrates a major shift toward decentralized educational policy implementation, granting local authorities significant responsibilities in managing school education. Participants acknowledged the constitutional framework underpinning this shift, emphasizing its alignment with the ideological principle of power sharing. This transformation fosters a more democratic and inclusive approach to educational governance, allowing local governments to play a direct role in decision-making and policy formulation. However, decentralization presents both opportunities and challenges, as observed in prior studies (Litvack et al., 1998; Treisman, 2007). While some cases show improvements in service delivery, others reveal governance difficulties, underscoring the importance of distinguishing between different forms of decentralization, such as devolution, delegation, and deconcentration (Channa & Faguet, 2012).

International donors also play a significant role in shaping Nepal's education policies, particularly through funding and providing strategic direction. An education resource person from a rural municipality noted that the heavy reliance on foreign aid influences policy decisions, often limiting local autonomy. While donor support has historically driven educational reforms, achieving greater policy independence depends on Nepal's ability to increase its education budget and reduce external dependence. The literature also reflects concerns about donor influence, as Patrick et al. (2021) argue that while decentralization can enhance educational outcomes, external factors can hinder its full realization. Additionally, the expanding role of private institutions adds another layer of complexity, as they increasingly shape the educational landscape and policy formulation, further influencing the trajectory of decentralization.

### **Context-Specific Policy, Teacher Capacity Enhancement, and Tailored Curriculum**

The educational managers interviewed for this study highlighted the key initiatives undertaken to improve school management. Local governments have implemented performance contracts, rigorous monitoring, and formulated local education acts to enhance accountability and community participation in education. The development of locally tailored curricula aligned with national standards reflects a commitment to addressing community-specific needs of the region. For instance, the Chair of Smirti Rural Municipality stated, "Our rural municipality has formulated the Village Education Act, available on our website. Based on this Act, we manage school education at the local level." A website review on April 30, 2023, confirmed the publication of the Education Act 2075 and other regulations. Regarding budget management, participants noted that teacher salaries are provided by the central government and distributed locally. Schools receive

conditional grants and additional local funds for infrastructure and educational activities. The participant PTA Chair remarked, "The local government allocates separate budgets to schools based on their programs. Recently, an incentive allowance was introduced to motivate teachers." Efforts to develop local curricula were evident in municipalities like Himalayan Rural Municipality, where an Education Officer stated, "We have proposed and coordinated with the provincial government for curriculum formulation. An orientation workshop is scheduled this month to initiate the process." By Chaitra 2079, the local curriculum had been implemented for classes one to five in the Himalayan Rural Municipality.

During a school management meeting in Baisakh 2080, the Headteacher of a Secondary School sought clarification on incorporating local curriculum content, emphasizing schools' autonomy in curriculum integration. Such initiatives demonstrate the commitment of local governments to curriculum development. Teacher capacity enhancement has also been prioritized in the literature. The Education Officer of one Rural Municipality shared: "We conduct ICT and math training, facilitate orientation programs, and encourage teachers to engage in action research and diary writing. Teachers are instructed to integrate ICT in classrooms." Despite these efforts, traditional structured assessments persist, with schools conducting unit, monthly, and annual examinations. During the pandemic, home-based assessments did not lead to lasting changes in evaluation practices. Local governments have also initiated financial support for education. A headteacher shared: "Our municipality provides grants for schools with fewer teachers, funds operating expenses for higher classes, and arranges day lunches for classes 1-5. ECD teachers receive additional local salary support."

These initiatives reflect local governments' commitment to school management, aligning with the sustainable development goal. Key efforts include financial grants, managing daily meal programs, teacher incentives, and locally tailored curricula, demonstrating a proactive approach to improving the quality of education.

### **Budget Dependency, Political Interference, and Ineffective Coordination**

In addition to policy perceptions and practices, the participants in this study—educational managers and stakeholders—identified several recurring challenges in managing school education at the local level. These include a persistent centralized mindset in power-sharing, financial dependency and uncertainty in educational investment and manpower management, strategic ambiguity from the central government, and inadequate coordination and cooperation between the federal, provincial, and local authorities. Additionally, participants highlighted the shortage of qualified manpower and weak monitoring and supervision systems as critical obstacles to effective governance in education. Despite the constitutional shift toward decentralized education management under Nepal's Constitution (2015) and the Local Government Operation Act (2017), the

interviews revealed that public representatives and education staff remain entrenched in traditional, centralized policies and practices. This resistance poses a significant challenge to the effective implementation of federal educational policies. One headteacher expressed:

Educational staff and school teachers face psychological problems while working at the local level. You can ask all your teacher friends. They believe that the entire responsibility of school education should not be given to the local level because the people's representatives at the local level do not have a fair opinion about the activities of any person and do not independently evaluate the educational activities. Therefore, the responsibility of looking after the education of classes one through five should be at the local level. However, the central government should retain the right to provide secondary school education.

This perspective reflects an enduring, centralized mindset regarding secondary education. While advocating for decentralization in primary education, the participant insisted that secondary education should remain under federal control. Such attitudes indicate bureaucratic reluctance at all government levels to fully implement decentralized education policies, further complicating governance and policy execution.

### **Budget Dependency and Manpower Management**

Participants emphasized local governments' dependence on the federal government for budget allocations and manpower management in school education. The successful implementation of free and compulsory education requires substantial financial and human resources at both the local and federal levels. However, respondents pointed to an imbalance in manpower distribution and workload at the local level, hampering effective management. A Rural Municipality Education Officer stated:

To make the management of school education effective, the existing human resources at the local level are insufficient, so the required number of people should be managed. When allocating the budget in the education sector, it should be allocated with the same priority as other sectors. A significant increase in the currently allocated budget for education is necessary.

This statement reflects two critical issues: the inadequate workforce to meet educational demands and the need for greater financial prioritization of education. Without sufficient funding and personnel, local governments struggle to implement policies effectively, exacerbating disparities in educational management.

### **Political Interference in Education Management**

Another recurring theme was pervasive political interference in school education management. Participants reported that political parties frequently

intervened in teacher appointments, transfers, and the formation of school management committees. These practices have blurred the boundaries between education and politics, making it difficult to maintain neutrality in school governance. An Education Officer remarked:

It's a good question. As is well known, nothing is untouched by politics, including the teacher recruitment process. This process is not untouched by political parties. This is the situation here as well.

Similarly, one headteacher expressed:

Yes, I have experienced a lot. This should not remain hidden. I have been working as a headteacher at this school since 2064 B.S. The School Management Committee has been formed five to seven times during my tenure. Political interference is a possibility; however, we must create a situation that allows for open debate among school stakeholders. During the formation of the school management committee, as the headmaster, I organized 2-4 meetings and created an environment for people from political parties to debate openly. In the meetings, I try to convince them by saying that they are responsible for running the school, and they finally come to an understanding after a long debate, and the problem is solved. People have their interests and ideas, but after discussing a common agenda, they come to their senses. This is what I feel.

These reflections reveal that political pressure remains an open secret in the management of schools. Educational leaders frequently struggle to counteract such interference, and while some manage to facilitate open discussions, the broader challenge of political influence persists in the background.

### **Ineffective Intergovernmental Coordination**

Participants also identified weak coordination and cooperation between different levels of government as a fundamental challenge. There is a significant gap in collaboration among federal education coordination units, provincial social development branches, and local governments. This lack of synergy hinders the effective implementation of educational policies. An Education Coordinator from the Smriti Rural Municipality highlighted the following:

While implementing the constitutional provisions regarding school education management, the federal government should support and coordinate local levels effectively, which has not been done yet. The federal government has yet to ask a single question or do a follow-up at this local level. The present education staff, who worked under the policy direction of the central government in the past, are not given the necessary orientation and awareness program while working at the local level.

Similarly, a rural municipality chairperson added:

There is an education coordination unit under the federal government and a social development branch under the province. These

bodies have coordinated to implement some programs. However, there has not been effective coordination and cooperation between the three bodies. These things should be made effective in the coming days. To effectively implement the existing policies and laws of school education management, the government should take steps to identify problems from the grassroots level with all stakeholders.

These insights reveal that insufficient coordination among government tiers has led to ineffective policy implementation. Participants stressed the need for improved federal-local collaboration, capacity-building initiatives for local educational authorities, and the elimination of hierarchical superiority among central and local staff to promote a more cooperative governing structure.

## **Discussion**

The decentralization of education management in Nepal under the federal system has empowered local governments with substantial authority over policy formulation, resource allocation, and staff appointments. This restructuring, mandated by the Constitution of Nepal (2015) and the Local Government Operation Act (2017), aimed to promote participatory governance and localized decision-making. However, as observed in other decentralized contexts (Nurkolis & Sulisworo, 2018; Patrick et al., 2021), ambiguities in role definition and inconsistent policy execution remain significant challenges. The absence of a new Federal Education Act has further exacerbated strategic uncertainties, leading to varied interpretations of local governments' roles and responsibilities.

These findings align with decentralization theories, which suggest that while local governance can enhance policy relevance and responsiveness, it also introduces governance complexities (Sanderson, 2009). Similar to the findings of Neupane (2019) and Acharya (2021), this study reveals that educational managers struggle with unclear federal guidelines, leading to the fragmented implementation of policies. The inconsistency in local government capacities, as evidenced by comparative studies (Douglas College, 2017; OECD, 2017), further contributes to inefficiencies, highlighting the need for structured capacity-building initiatives.

A critical insight from this study is the persistence of centralized governance mindsets among educational managers, particularly in the field of secondary education. Despite the constitutional mandate for decentralization, some stakeholders are reluctant to relinquish central control. This aligns with Bray's (1999) concept of "implementationist myopia," where entrenched, centralized practices hinder the transformative potential of federal reforms. Similar trends have been observed in Indonesia (Muhi, 2019) and Sri Lanka (Alawattagam, 2020), where historical administrative structures continue to shape the decentralized governance models.

Nevertheless, positive developments have emerged at the local level, demonstrating the potential of decentralized educational governance. Local

governments have initiated community-responsive policies, such as localized curricula and skill-based education programmes, paralleling international trends where decentralization fosters innovative, context-specific educational solutions (David, 1989; Sharpe, 1996). The implementation of digital technology in educational management, as highlighted by Osorio and Banzato (2022), presents another opportunity for local adaptations. However, systemic limitations, including financial constraints and political interference, restrict the scalability of these initiatives, a challenge also noted in Bangladesh and Pakistan (Mustary 2021; PILDAT 2011).

Political interference is a major impediment to effective policy execution. As observed in Khanal and Regmi's (2023) study on policy accountability, political influences on teacher appointments and school management contribute to inefficiencies. This phenomenon, consistent with experiences in other decentralized settings (Espinoza, 2009; Singh & Nagpal, 2010), suggests that depoliticising education governance is crucial for sustainable policy implementation.

Furthermore, financial dependency on the federal government undermines local governments' autonomy in managing education. Inconsistencies in budget allocation and bureaucratic inefficiencies reflect the challenges faced by other nations transitioning to decentralized governance models (Gwang Prakash, 2012; Gwang, 2002). This calls for enhanced financial autonomy, clearer role delineation among government tiers, and improved intergovernmental coordination to ensure the effectiveness of decentralized education policies.

Despite these challenges, some promising initiatives indicate progress in this area. The development of local education acts and community-driven policies suggests a commitment to decentralization in education. However, sustaining these efforts requires increased funding, systematic evaluation, and ongoing professional development programs for local education managers. Aligning with global best practices, as seen in European Union models (Saienko et al., 2023), the integration of technological advancements and policy frameworks can further enhance governance efficiency.

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals that the implementation of educational federalism in Nepal remains a complex, contested, and incomplete process more than a decade after the 2015 Constitution. Local education managers and stakeholders perceive their roles with a mixture of optimism and realism. They value the constitutional promise of power-sharing, delegated authority, and enhanced local autonomy, which has enabled meaningful grassroots innovations. These include the development of context-specific policies such as tailored local curricula, local education acts, targeted teacher capacity-building programs, performance contracts with rigorous monitoring, incentive allowances, and supplementary financial

supports such as school grants, daily meal programs, and additional salary top-ups for early childhood development teachers. Such adaptations demonstrate genuine local agency and align closely with federalism's core intent of making education more responsive to community needs and supportive of sustainable development goals, particularly at the primary and basic levels.

However, the findings highlight a profound disjuncture between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities. Participants affirmed the potential efficacy of decentralization in principle, yet they confronted severe systemic and contextual barriers that undermined effective implementation. The most salient challenges include: heavy fiscal dependency on federal conditional grants coupled with inadequate overall budgets, which restrict local planning and resource flexibility; pervasive political interference in teacher recruitment, transfers, and school management committee formations, which erodes neutrality and merit-based governance; a persistent centralized mindset, especially concerning secondary education, where entrenched bureaucratic and teacher attitudes resist full devolution; weak or absent intergovernmental coordination across federal, provincial, and local tiers, leading to policy ambiguity, lack of follow-up support, and strategic silence from the center; and continuing external influences from international donors, national political culture, and private sector actors that limit genuine local ownership. These interconnected constraints form a vicious cycle in which structural and legislative gaps most notably the prolonged absence of a comprehensive Federal Education Act sustain role confusion, perpetuate resource imbalances, reinforce centralized habits, and invite political capture, ultimately reconcentrating effective power at higher levels, despite constitutional provisions. The core impediment is therefore not a lack of local initiative or capacity but a systemic failure to establish an enabling environment through simultaneous, holistic reforms.

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