



## Parents' Perceptions Towards Free and Compulsory Education

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### Article Info

### Abstract

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*This article is the study of school-going age children which is now a fundamental right in Nepal as described in article-31 in the constitution of Nepal in 2015 and the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2018. On the same foundation, this article aims to study the view of parents towards the national policy of free and compulsory education. The research is based on the qualitative research design, which includes an in-depth study and document review of different national policies and field studies. Furthermore, the field study was conducted among the parents using a questionnaire interview to determine the real and exact situation of parents towards free and compulsory education. The research findings depicted no real feeling of free and compulsory education at the grassroots level. Parents have to pay some amount of money even in the community school for the education of their children. The scholarships provided by the nation are not sufficient for the poor, indigenous, backward and physically and mentally disabled students. The three-tier government has to work at its best to bring free and compulsory education into real practice in our everyday lives. The stakeholders are responsible for bringing this into practice as education is the only way to a prosperous and happy society and nation.*

**Keywords:** Free and compulsory education, school, government, parents' perceptions

### Introduction

Education plays a significant role in human life. It is a lifelong process that begins at birth and continues throughout life. As per many scholars, education is the process of developing a sound body and sound mind. Education helps enhance human capabilities, particularly the senses, enabling them to recognize and value the observation of ultimate truth, goodness, and beauty. These components constitute the core of the perfect enjoyment of human lives. Education imparts sociocultural elements to the next generation for their knowledge. Additionally, it seeks to mainstream social change by advancing justice, preserving human rights, and bolstering democracy. Therefore, the state must provide reasonable educational opportunities to all citizens of a nation.

The government offers public education at several levels, including non-formal education, technical and vocational education, higher education, secondary education, and basic education (Dupriez & may, 2006). Among the various tiers of the country's educational hierarchy, basic education is the first stage of schooling for a child. The diverse educational initiatives across a range of contexts seek to address the core needs outlined in the global declaration on education for all (Dreze & Sen, 2003). Moreover, it encompasses a range of informal and non-formal communities, as well as customized activities designed to fulfil the elementary learning needs of the general public across all age groups (Aluede, 2006).

There is a strong thought that education must be provided to children to widen their development and make the nation prosperous. Compulsory education is a mandatory provision to study regularly and complete a basic level of study by children of the age prescribed by the Government of Nepal. In the same way, free education implies education to be provided by the school or educational institution without receiving any fee under any heading from the student or guardian. The notion of free and compulsory education is included in the national policy and provision in Nepal.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), the Agreement on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981), the World Statement on Education for All (EFA), and the millennium development goals (MDGs) have all recognised primary education as a fundamental human right (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989: UNICEF.), which was recognized by Nepal. Unfortunately, many kids still do not have access to high-quality basic education worldwide (UNESCO, 2010). Nepal is not an anomaly in this sense. In this regard, Nepal is no exception. One of the reasons for this is deeply ingrained structural disparities that act as a significant obstacle to universal primary education in most developing countries, which applies to Nepal's context (The World Bank & DFID, 2006).

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees that every individual has the fundamental right to an education. It includes free and compulsory basic education, free education up to the secondary level, and the right to receive education (Article 31). It demonstrates how the Nepal government has made education a top priority, treating it as a vital constitutional right. Furthermore, by making basic education mandatory and free, greater attention is placed on it. The Education Act 1971 (eighth amendment) defines basic education in Nepal as elementary school through grade eight.

In my opinion, this article is thoughtful and well-researched, touching on global educational frameworks while grounding the discussion in Nepal's specific context. It raises critical questions about the parents' perception of achieving the goals of free and compulsory education. This blend of global perspective and local challenges makes it both relevant and insightful.

Global educational programs, strategies, and agendas place the highest priority on basic education. In light of this, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2016 to promote global development. The SDGs are an international call to action to end poverty, protect the environment, and guarantee prosperity and harmony for all people. Thus, "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all" was one of the global goals of the SDGs, which also had an emphasis on education (UNDP, 2016).

The Nepal government has made basic education a top priority to accomplish SDG 4 by ensuring inclusive and high-quality education for everyone. Additionally, according to the Nepal Planning Commission (2017), all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and high-quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes." Without Nepal's basic education being properly provided, this goal cannot be accomplished. As a result, the Nepalese government places a high priority on equity and access to basic education. As a result, the Nepali government is working to accomplish SDG 4 through various policies and initiatives related to education.

There is no vaguer idea of free and compulsory education than what is reflected in the Nepali system. While the constitution ensures free and compulsory education, government schools in Nepal haven't been able to operate in a manner that would guarantee schooling at no cost. In this paradox, this research aims to find the parental perception of free and compulsory education in our context.

Despite Nepal's constitutional guarantee of free and compulsory basic education, there remains a significant disparity between the policy and its practical implementation. Government schools often fail to fully ensure education at no cost, resulting in hidden expenses, inadequate resources, and low-quality education. These challenges hinder the effective realization of the promise of free and compulsory education.

In this context, the perception of parents plays a crucial role. Parents' understanding, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the accessibility, quality, and outcomes of free and compulsory education directly affect school enrolment and participation. Many parents, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, may perceive government-provided education as insufficient or of poor quality, leading to reluctance in sending children to school, despite the mandate.

This research aims to explore and understand parental perceptions of free and compulsory education in Nepal, identify the factors influencing these perceptions, and examine how these views impact the success of educational policies and initiatives aimed at achieving universal education. Understanding these perceptions is key to addressing the structural and practical gaps that prevent Nepal from fully realizing the goals of equitable, high-quality education for all.

My study about parents' perception toward free and compulsory education is significant to provide valuable insights into the factors that influence parental decision-making about education, inform policy, and offer solutions to ensure that free and compulsory education in Nepal is not only available but also meaningful and accessible to all children. The main objective of this article is to study the parents' perception towards free and compulsory education.

### **Research Methodology**

The research design is qualitative. I applied the interpretive inquiry method which develops knowledge from the interpretation of lived experiences (Plunket, 2013). I chose five parents whose children were studying at the community schools in Tokha municipality of Kathmandu Valley. I administered in-depth interviews to them. I collected each parent's views with the help of in-depth interviews which were supplemented with an open-ended questionnaire. I analyzed data through a thematic process. For this, I developed six themes viz. right to education, implementation mechanisms, inclusion and equity, accountability and consequences, quality of education, and financial provisions.

### **Data collection procedure**

First of all, I requested the head teacher of Shree Manohar Secondary School, Tokha right one day before my visit and talked about the purpose of my study via cell call. The next day, I visited the same school at Tokha Municipality. After informal discussions for some time in the Principal's office, I met five parents, whose children were studying at this school. I managed the time to conduct in-depth interviews with each participant's parents. The time allocated to them to answer the questions was only fifteen minutes. I asked them the questions to obtain general information and Parents' perceptions towards free and compulsory education. After that, I noted each participant's response in my diary sincerely. I collected all the required information from the participants based on the right to education, implementation mechanisms, inclusion and equity, accountability and consequences, quality of education, and financial provisions. At last, I thank all participants' parents and the head teacher for their cooperation in collecting my study data. Along with this, as secondary data, document reviews of different national policies and field studies are also done.

### **Literature Review**

The Constitution of Nepal guarantees the right to free and compulsory education. In particular, as a fundamental right, the right to education is guaranteed by Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015). It declares that every citizen shall have the right to get compulsory and free education up to the basic level and free education up to the secondary level from the state. Similarly, citizens with disabilities and indigent citizens shall have the right to get free higher education following the law.

Education Act (1971) and Education Regulation (2002) have also focused on free education at the primary level in community schools. The act mentioned the provision of free books for those students who are admitted to community schools. Similarly, this act also mentioned that education will be free for girls, and indigenous people who are under of poverty line. In this context, the "poverty line" refers to the minimum level of income that is considered necessary for individuals or families to meet their basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing. People living below the poverty line are classified as economically disadvantaged and may struggle to afford essential services, including education. The Education Act (1971) and Education Regulation (2002) provide free education for girls and indigenous people who fall below this income threshold, ensuring they have access to education despite their financial difficulties.

School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2016) was executed by the Ministry of Education as a major strategic educational strategy. To meet the goal of establishing equitable access to high-quality basic education for all children in the 5–12 age range, it has given special priority to basic education to make it easily accessible, qualitative, and justifiable through a right-based approach.

Since 2016, the SSDP (2016-2023) has been adhering to the SSRP with an emphasis on improving student learning attainment and education quality. As stated in the new Nepalese Constitution, the SSDP also gives priority to basic education to fulfil basic education as a fundamental right by making it both mandatory and accessible. The objectives of basic education under the SSDP are to guarantee school readiness and universal access to high-quality basic education to enhance the physical, socio-emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and ethical potential of all children aged 5 to 12 (MOE, 2011 & MOE, 2016).

In my judgment, The Constitution of Nepal, along with the Education Act (1971) and Education Regulation (2002), has made commendable efforts to provide free and compulsory education, especially for marginalized communities such as girls, indigenous people, and those living below the poverty line. These provisions reflect the state's recognition of education as a fundamental right and its intention to reduce inequality in access to education.

However, while the policies look promising on paper, their implementation seems to face challenges. The School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) and the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) aim to improve education quality and accessibility, but the effectiveness of these programs likely depends on the resources and commitment of the government at various levels.

Your opinion might also acknowledge the significance of guaranteeing education not just as a policy but as a right, recognizing the broader objective of holistic child development (intellectual, socio-emotional, and ethical), as outlined in the SSDP. Nevertheless, the gap between policy and practice remains a concern, particularly in reaching marginalized groups.

In essence, while Nepal's policies are progressive, ensuring that these rights are fully realized will require consistent attention to the practical challenges of implementation.

In light of this, the Act Concerning compulsory and free education was passed by the Government of Nepal (GON) in 2018. With the passage of this Act, the state assumed responsibility for guaranteeing that no child be denied an education. The new Act requires the government to make sure that all children in the basic education age group of 5 to 12 are enrolled in public schools and receive a free education. Similarly, this act also makes the strong provision of omission from all kinds of government services for those parents who do not send their children to school and makes them illegible for government jobs by 2027 AD for those who failed to complete a basic level of education. This also mandates the local level to make provisions for necessary lab, materials for extra-curricular activities, sports materials, sports infrastructures, computers, and access to information technology (Comparably, basic education has been given top priority in The Fifteenth Plan (2019–20–2023–24), which aims to make it free and required for all kids. Furthermore, the Concept Paper of the Sixteenth Plan (2024) also highlights free and compulsory education providing scholarships to targeted groups to strengthen the nationally ambitious yet very significant policy.

Similarly, the Free and Compulsory Education Rule (2020) states that no community school shall be allowed to charge admission fees, monthly tuition fees, examination fees and textbook fees up to the secondary level. In addition, the local levels shall make special provisions for the education of differently-abled, Dalit and poor children. The teaching-learning materials developed should be disabled-friendly, besides providing such children with midday meals, school uniforms and other basic facilities. For the implementation of the act and rules, the local levels shall collect and maintain the details of illiterate citizens, differently-abled children (according to the nature of their disability), children who have been out of school due to various reasons, Dalit children studying in the basic and secondary levels, children whose parent(s) are unidentified and drop-outs in their areas. These details shall be updated within one month of completion of each academic year. The rules have also stipulated a provision for a five-member scholarship management committee led by the chief of the local level to identify and select beneficiaries for scholarships to be provided to children as per the law. Likewise, the local levels may conduct programmes of alternative and open education. Similarly, the Scholarship Rules (2003) also managed various scholarships for girls, disabled, indigenous, marginalized and poor students.

School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032) has put forward the vision of “A School with Complete Infrastructure” with the provision of electricity to run appliances in the schools as an integral part of the infrastructure development in the school. This also helps to achieve the mandatory provision of free and compulsory education.

In my opinion, the Act concerning compulsory and free Education, enacted by the Government of Nepal in 2018, mandates that every child aged 5 to 12 be enrolled in public schools and receive free education. The Act holds parents accountable; those who do not send their children to school risk losing access to government services and jobs by 2027. Local governments are required to provide necessary educational resources, including materials for extracurricular activities and technology access, while ensuring support for differently-abled, Dalit, and impoverished children.



The Free and Compulsory Education Rule (2020) prohibits community schools from charging fees, and local authorities must gather data on illiterate citizens and disadvantaged children to implement educational support effectively. A scholarship management committee is tasked with identifying beneficiaries for various scholarships aimed at marginalized groups.

The School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032) envisions schools equipped with complete infrastructure, including electricity, to support the goal of providing free and compulsory education. Overall, these initiatives emphasize the importance of accessible education and targeted support for vulnerable populations in Nepal.

Local Government Operation Act (2074) does not explicitly mention that local government is responsible for secondary education, and 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 (Gandharba & Gaire, 2021).

Khanal (2023) in his study “Free Basic Education in Nepal: A Myth or Reality” suggested that there is almost no provision for free and compulsory education in real practice. This is because the national budget allocation is not sufficient for the whole management across Nepal.

On a similar note, there are private institutions of education running under the Company Act (2006) that clearly state that private schools can make a profit by opening and managing the schools. Expecting free and compulsory education in the country where private schools are allowed to run under the Company Act is a complete paradox in the context of Nepal (Baral, 2023).

In my article, the related literature is thoroughly reviewed and a field study was conducted to know the real facts and situation. The prime document for the review is the Constitution of Nepal (2015). The Act relating to the free and compulsory education act (2018) is also an important document for this article. Education Act (1971), Education Regulation (2002), School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2015), School Sector Development Plan (2016-2023), The Fifteen Plan (2019-2023), School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032), Scholarship rules (2003), are also taken for the literature review. Books, newspaper editorials, articles, journals, and national and internal reports are also considered for the review.

In my opinion, Nepal’s Constitution and various educational laws and policies strongly emphasize free and compulsory education as a fundamental right, but there are significant challenges in its practical implementation. Despite the legislative framework, such as the Education Act (1971), the Act Concerning Compulsory and Free Education (2018), and related educational reforms, including the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) and Free and Compulsory Education Rule (2020), gaps remain in delivering on these promises.

Key barriers include inadequate budget allocation, ambiguity in local governments’ roles, and the coexistence of profit-driven private schools under the Company Act (2006), which creates a paradox in the realization of free education. Additionally, while there are scholarships and special provisions for marginalized groups, the actual effectiveness of these programs is limited due to systemic issues, as highlighted by Khanal (2023) and Baral (2023). Overall, the commitment to free and compulsory education remains more aspirational than fully realized in practice.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Free and compulsory education is a program based on the principle of child rights, which is following the announcement of the Constitution, Act and Rules related to Free and Compulsory Education. The government is moving towards a targeted education program for all. However, it has been a challenge to reach out to the children behind the education. Discussion of this research study is made based on the themes that I have created above in the research methodology section.

### **Parents’ perception towards free and compulsory education**

The main focus of this study is on parents’ perception towards free and compulsory education, which is guaranteed by Nepal’s national policies. It is found that many parents are almost unaware of recent policies and provisions regarding free and compulsory education.

The first participant (P1) who is from the so-called Dalit community and has her son studying in grade 3 at the Manohar Secondary School said:

*I have sent my son to this school this year. I have to pay for the dress, copy and other stationery items. However, my son was admitted without any cost. The headteacher from the school informed me that they would give scholarships but has not yet received them.*

The second who has his son in grade 4 in the next community school said:

*Yes, we pay a small amount of money for the admission. There is the provision of paying a very small amount of money as the monthly tuition fee. It is much less as compared to private school. School is good and it does not matter to me to pay such an amount of money. If the school provides quality education, we should be ready to pay a nominal amount of money for the school.*

The third who has his son in grade 7 in the next community school said:

*My son is very excellent in study. He obtained a grade point average of 4 in the previous class. I do not have to pay any amount of money to school. However, I have to spend money on stationery and dresses. They give scholarships for the assistance of education but that is not sufficient.*

Similarly, the fourth who has his son studying in grade 8 said:

*My son is in grade 8 and he has been studying in the same school since he was in ECD. I remember I paid a bit more money when he was in Junior grades but I do not have to pay now. However, we parents, in the parents' meeting, decided to pay tuition fees for the coaching classes that are conducted before and after school hours to get good grades in BLE.*

The fifth respondent (R5) who has her daughter reading in grade 6 said, "I have not paid any amount of money for two years in school. Everything in school is free. They provided books and a scholarship of 400 rupees last year. I spend money only on dresses and stationeries."

In essence, each respondent highlights a mix of free education with minor associated costs like dress, stationery, or coaching fees, and most mention scholarships as a form of support, though sometimes insufficient.

Based on the information collected from the field visit, the thematic analysis explores parents' perceptions regarding free and compulsory education in Nepal, focusing on six key themes viz. right to education, implementation mechanisms, inclusion and equity, accountability and consequences, quality of education, and financial provisions.

### **Theme 1: Right to education**

Many parents (participants) said that they recognize the constitutional guarantee of free and compulsory education. However, understanding of the specifics, such as the age range covered and the rights afforded to their children, varies significantly. While parents appreciate the formal recognition of education as a right, they often perceive a disconnect between this right and the actual conditions in schools. There is a general sentiment that although education is free in theory, many still encounter hidden costs that hinder full access.

Regarding theme 1, all the participants whose children were studying in different grades at the Manohar Secondary School found that they were almost unaware of recent policies and provisions of free and compulsory education.

### **Theme 2: Implementation mechanisms**

Many parents (participants) reported a lack of clear communication from schools and local authorities about the implementation of free education policies, leading to confusion about enrollment processes and eligibility criteria for scholarships. Many parents believe that local governments play a crucial role in implementing education policies, but they express concerns about inefficiencies and a lack of accountability in ensuring that policies are executed as intended.

Regarding theme 2, all the participants whose children were studying in different grades at the Manohar Secondary School found that they were almost unaware of the implementation of recent policies and provisions of free and compulsory education due to the lack of accountability of school administrators.

### **Theme 3: Inclusion and equity**

Many parents (participants) from marginalized communities (such as Dalits and those living in poverty) expressed mixed feelings. While they appreciate the provisions for their children's education, many feel that barriers still exist, such as social stigma and inadequate support services. Some parents of differently-abled children felt that the educational environment was not sufficiently inclusive, highlighting the need for improved facilities and resources tailored to meet the needs of all students.

Regarding theme 3, all the participants whose children were studying in different grades at the Manohar Secondary School found that they are no inclusiveness and parity in the real classroom teaching.

### **Theme 4: Accountability and consequences**

Many parents (participants) said that there is a consensus among parents regarding the importance of their role in ensuring that their children attend school. However, many are concerned about the implications of penalties for not sending their children to school, feeling that it places undue pressure on families, especially those facing economic challenges. Parents express a desire for more community involvement in educational decision-making. They believe that empowering local communities can lead to better accountability and ensure that educational needs are adequately met.

Regarding theme 4, all the participants whose children were studying in different grades at the Manohar Secondary School found that empowering local communities can lead to better accountability.

### **Theme 5: Quality of education**

Many parents (participants) said that they are dissatisfied with the quality of education provided in community schools. They reported concerns over overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, and a lack of qualified teachers, which they feel undermines their children's educational outcomes. To compensate for perceived deficiencies in the quality of schooling, parents often seek additional coaching or tutoring for their children. This reliance on supplementary education highlights the gap between policy intentions and practical implementation.

Regarding theme 5, all the participants were found dissatisfied with the quality of education provided in community schools and demanded supplementary education.

### **Theme 6: Financial provisions**

Many parents (participants) acknowledge that while education is intended to be free, they often incur additional expenses for uniforms, textbooks, and extracurricular activities. These hidden costs create financial burdens, especially for low-income families, leading to concerns about the overall accessibility of education. There is a prevalent skepticism among parents regarding the government's financial commitment to education. Many believe that budget allocations are insufficient to sustain free and compulsory education initiatives, which affects the quality and availability of educational resources.

Regarding theme 6, all the participants believed that budget allocations are insufficient to sustain free and compulsory education initiatives, which affects the quality and availability of educational resources.

### **Conclusion**

The government came up with the constitutional and legal provisions for free education at least up to the secondary level because it knows that not all Nepali can afford to pay for their children's education. It is said that about a quarter of Nepal's population still lives below the national poverty line (Fifteen Plan, 2016). We cannot expect the parents in this segment of the population to pay fees to send their children to school when they have to struggle even to make ends meet. A question that arises here is why the schools charge fees for the education which is supposed to be free. The answer is - that the funds they receive from the government to run this "free education for all" movement are not enough and the schools are forced to raise the amount of funds they are short of, obviously, from the students. So, one of the major problems is that "free" education is not free! This has had impacts on the country's school enrollment and dropout rates. The enrollment rates have improved but they could have been even better, had the government been able to implement the constitutional

and legal provision of free education. Similarly, the country would have seen the much-needed improvement in the school dropout rates if the government had been able to walk the talk of free education.

Local government seems to be in a paradoxical position as it has been mandated with the responsibility of managing education up to the secondary level but it is not efficiently capacitated yet to manage all the necessities for basic education effectively in terms of both human and financial resources. The federal government still is not ready to share the exercise of state power with provincial and local governments as envisioned by the Constitution. The federal government has imposed the responsibility of arranging school education to local government but is reluctant to allocate more budgets as well as amend the existing Education Act 2028 BS and capacitate local government through the Federal Education Act. Legislating laws and policies without evidence-based analysis, planning and budgeting leads society to injustice. Poor and marginalized sections are not able to get school education though the government has made education free. The state imposes the perceived order of school education and targets to achieve it by 2084 BS. However, it is going to create inequality by having limited rights to freedom and employment. Changing laws and policy as the situation differs is the common practice of less developed societies and the Nepal government would extend the period to compulsory basic education. However, it seems not easy to achieve until efficiently capacitated local government, close to citizens, as local government can assess the context with evidence-based analysis, planning and budgeting. Finally, as Hope (2011) contends, the state not only provisions the right to education in policy but also provides education services to its people without any forms of discrimination to avoid paradoxes.

Moreover, enacting robust legislative frameworks mandating free education up to a certain age, in alignment with international agreements and the country's constitution, is essential. Concurrently, widespread public awareness campaigns should be launched to educate communities on the importance of education and the rights of children. To overcome infrastructural challenges, significant investments should be made to build and upgrade school facilities, particularly in remote and marginalized areas. This includes providing necessary resources like classrooms, libraries, and sanitation facilities, as well as ensuring accessibility for children with disabilities. Teacher training programs must be bolstered to enhance the quality of education, with a focus on recruiting and retaining qualified educators, especially in underserved regions. Additionally, fostering partnerships between schools, communities, and local authorities is crucial for creating a supportive environment that encourages enrollment and attendance, particularly among marginalized groups.

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