

Minimum School Safety Package: Understanding of Key Policy Actors

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Abstract

The article examines the understanding of Nepal's minimum school safety package among different policy actors especially of the school teacher, head teacher and senior officer of Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interview. The data were collected through in-depth interview and analysis of the policy text. Through in-depth interviews and the available policy document's content analysis, the study revealed disparities in comprehension, with some focusing solely on physical infrastructure while overlooking holistic safety measures. Moreover, the study revealed that the use of jargon in policy documents further complicates understanding among grassroots-level stakeholders. The findings highlighted the need for improved communication and coordination among policymakers and implementers to ensure effective implementation of school safety measures and address the diverse needs of schools across Nepal. Overall, the article underscored the importance of bridging the gap between policy formulation and grassroots-level understanding to ensure the successful implementation of school safety measures.

Keywords: Policy actors, Risk reduction, School safety

Introduction

To systematize the education system, government has introduced many education policies and minimum school safety package is one of them. With the aim of saving the human lives including the lives of students, teachers and other actors related to schools, reducing the destruction of physical facilities including school buildings and education materials, avoiding the possible academic hours' losses due to closure of school due to disaster and minimizing the psychological pressures among the teachers and students, government of Nepal has introduced many policies on safe school (Ghimire, 2021). If we look at the history of safe school policy in Nepal, Child Friendly Schools National Framework for Quality Education (DoE 2010) has initiated to talk about the safety and security of students inside and outside of the school premises. In the same vein, policies came latter to the child friendly school national framework like Supplementary Training Manual on Annual

School Improvement Plan (2016), Contingency Plan for Nepal Education Cluster (2017), School Improvement Plan Development Guidelines (2017), Nepal Safe School Policy (2017), Comprehensive School Safety Master Plan (2017) and Comprehensive School Safety Minimum Package (2018) provide detailed guidelines to keep school environment safe and secured (Yadav & Kristen, 2022). School Improvement Plan (SIP) is one of the commonly known plan prepared at the grassroots level by school itself to improve the overall school environment and the then Department of Education prepared a supplementary training manual on how to develop SIP including school safety concerns (DoE, 2016). This training manual was for the school supervisors, resource persons, rooster teacher trainers and any other resource persons who work for none governmental organizations (Yadav & Kristen, 2022). After that, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology introduced School Improvement Plan Development Guidelines on 2017 with the aim of supporting the schools itself to develop their SIPs including the disaster risk reduction component. This guideline mainly emphasized the five things which are risk assessment and hazard mapping, emergency preparedness and response planning, infrastructure and school building safety, education and awareness and community engagement for the disaster risk management (MoEST, 2017).

On top of the above mentioned policies, Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) introduced and policy called minimum school safety package in 2018 to ensure the basic things are in placed in each schools for the safety and security of human life and educational materials inside the schools. According to Concordia University (2016), school safety not only provides the sense of security among the students but also it supports them to have better academic performance. This minimum school safety package too is intended to be implemented in all schools to make the students feel safe and excel their academic performance. It is a duty of every nation to make the learning environment safer (Applebury, 2021) and this policy overtly focuses to fulfil the duty of nation ensuring the minimum safety in school.

Although the government of Nepal has introduced minimum school safety package to roll it out in every schools, implementation of this policy faces significant challenges. Despite the constitutional mandate empowering 753 local governments to manage school education up to grade 12 (Constitution of Nepal, 2015), the absence of clear directives hampers effective planning and execution of minimum safety package as these tools and guidelines are yet to be mainstreamed into the management of schools (Yadav & Kristen, 2022). As indicated by Ghimire (2021), there are similar several policies and the stakeholders get confused which one to implement in school. Thus, this policy is focused to identify the understanding of different level of policy actors on minimum school safety package. Being an independent researcher, I would like to explore how the policy text are written and how the policy actors have actually understood it.

Objective of the Study

This study is intended to explore the understanding of stakeholders on minimum school safety package at various level of policy actors.

Research questions

To fulfil the above mentioned objective, I have asked the policy actors to describe their understanding of minimum school safety package including what the policy is about, why this policy has been implemented, how they are implementing it. In this way, research questions are developed to get the in-depth view and the lived experience of the participants (Craft, 2000).

Policy Framework and Methodology

My research underpinned the policy sociology, aiming to explore diverse understanding and interpretations of different level of policy actors of minimum school safety package. The policy sociology is a field that focuses on understanding current social situations while considering their historical roots and cross-cultural differences (Levinson et al., 2020). Policy sociology mainly reflects a specific viewpoint on what reality is like and how things should be done, and this perspective emphasizes how policies interact with both official laws and informal social norms have same or different understanding (Lashaw, 2018). It primarily emphasizes on how people organize their actions and distribute resources, whether through formal rules or informal customs (Sandler, 2018). According to Shore & Wright (1997), policies are not just about what governments decide; they're also shaped by the diverse ways people live and interact in society.

As policy sociology helps to examine its understandings at different layers, I have used the framework developed by Hornberger & Johnson (2007) to explore the complex layers understanding of key policy actors. This methodological framework provides a structured lens through which to comprehensively investigate the complexities of any policy, considering key dimensions such as agents, goals, processes, discourses, and dynamic social and historical contexts. This framework has allowed me to explore whether the intended objective of the policy is similar to the actual understanding of the policy actors at different level or not.

This research employs the in-depth interview method to collect the first hand data. I believe that the lived experience of the teachers can only be collected through qualitative information. On top of the pre-determined questions, I have asked many probing questions to get the in-depth idea. These probing questions not only helped to understand the inner views of the respondents, but also enriched the data for this research. Three respondents have been purposefully selected ranging from teacher, head teacher and the undersecretary from ministry of education, science and technology. All the data has been coded and analyzed

through thematic approach (Riessman, 2005, Palinkas et al., 2015). I have assigned the code for the participants of interview as school teacher, head teacher, and undersecretary of ministry of education. All the ethical consents have been taken before interviewing them and they are well informed that the data will be anonymously used for research purpose.

On top of the in-depth interview, I have analyzed the actual text of the policy. I have tried to create themes of the textual analysis too and compared the theme of the policy text to the understanding of the key policy actors derived from in-depth interview. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, & Wodak, 1997) has been used to analyze the policy text.

Policy Provision: Content Analysis

Content analysis involves systematically analyzing the content of texts to identify themes, patterns, and trends. Here, I have used the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze this policy. CDA examines the ways in which language is used to construct social reality, power relations, and ideologies. It is particularly useful for understanding how educational policies are framed and how they shape public discourse.

While analyzing the text, I found that the policy mainly consists of four components and specifies sixteen different activities. The first component is about the role of School Management Committee (SMC) to ensure minimum safety within school premises. Under that component, following four activities are specified. First activity under this component is defining roles and responsibility of SMC. Similarly, next activity is the selection of Disaster Risk Reduction/School Safety and Gender, Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) focal teachers, third activity is the capacity development of head teachers/ DRR focal teachers on School's Disaster Risk Reduction's overarching concept and including participatory assessment tools and planning for school safety and fourth activity is especially focused on orientation of teachers/School Management Committee/Parent Teacher Association and students at school level by head teacher or the DRR focal teacher on school safety and continuation of schools and conduct school's Vulnerability Capacity Assessment (VCA) and multi hazard risk assessment including the potential issue for child protection.

The second component is for safe learning facilities and under this component, there are four activities which are i) infrastructural safety assessment, ii) development of minimum school infrastructural safety plan including school maintenance activities iii) School level infrastructural risk reduction activities including maintenance and iv) quality assurance in all kinds construction activities. Third component is for school disaster (risk) management and under this component too, there are four activities which are i) development of school safety

informed SIP covering school safety, risk reduction and child protection activities and school preparedness and response /continuity plan based on hazard risk assessment, with allocation of resources ii) Small scale structural/non-structural mitigation activities as reflected in the (SIP) plan iii) School disaster preparedness for response activities as reflected in the (SIP) plan and iv) Coordination by school with local stakeholders. Fourth component is related to disaster reduction and resilience education which consists of following four activities: i) school Curriculum include session on hazard/disaster and School safety/DRR measures and child protection measures for each class level ii) extra curriculum activities/informal promotional events conducted outside the classroom setting to promote disaster preparedness awareness among school teachers/students/SMC and parents iii) raising Awareness on Child protection issues in school and iv) interaction session between SMC & parents to raise awareness on DRM/school safety at school/community level.

The policy has specified the expected outcomes for each component and school level and palika level indicators for each activities including their means of verification for each activities' indicators. In this way, the policy is very specific and easy to measure whether the schools meet the specified minimum condition to be called the safe school

Policy Purpose

To regulate the day to day activities of the social institutions, government introduces many policies. The main objectives of any policies are to provide the clear way out on what should be done and what should not be done. Safe school was a buzzing phrase after the mega earthquake in Nepal in 2015. Due to its friable geographical structure, Nepal is known as a disaster-prone country and has witnessed several earthquakes and other natural catastrophes in recent years (Ghimire, 2021). Due to the devastating earthquake in 2015, thousands of people lost their lives, millions of students got injured and thousands of schools' buildings adversely damaged then everybody started to realize the importance of safe school and policy related to school safety. According to MoEST (2018), the main purposes of minimum school safety package are to reduce disaster risks in schools, including the establishment of basic safe learning facilities and life saving measures, enhance school level preparedness actions to ensure a continuity of education for children in the aftermath of disasters and build a sense of minimal level confidence and security among children, school faculties, and parents towards resilience in education. Further, the policy clearly states that, this package is to be implemented in every school either from external funding or from schools' own resources since this policy focuses on minimum things to be done to keep the school safe. It was hoped that the minimum school safety package will lay down a strong foundation to schools by helping the stakeholders to identify the possible hazards, their risks

and prepare the risk mitigation plan in advance to avoid the future possible damages. On top of that, it is aimed to promote resilience education among the teachers, students and guardians and foster a sense of safe to continue the teaching learning activities. This policy is also aimed to ensure the child protection in schools.

Result and discussion

Qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews and document analysis are subjected to thematic analysis. The process involves identifying recurring patterns, themes, and narratives related to the understanding of key policy actors towards the minimum school safety package. Through an iterative approach, I have attempted to capture the how the policy is drafted and how the key policy actors have understood it. In this section, I have explored, analyzed and interpreted the evidences. I have collected data through various means primarily from interview transcripts, diary writing after interaction, and the analysis of content from secondary literature and selected and combined 'what is useful' for the purpose of the study (Madison 2005). Then, I conducted a 'reconstructive analysis' (Carspecken 1996) by doing 'a deductive thematic coding' (Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019), which allowed me to 'code with analysis in mind' (Carspecken 1996). The views shared by the participants are grouped into three main themes: understanding is different, jargon vs colloquial language and four blinds and an elephant.

Understanding is different

While analyzing the text of the policy and the actual understanding of policy actors about the policy, I found the divergence between them. The policy talks about the four components including capacitating the school management committee on identifying the risks, the second component emphasizes about the learning facilities third component stresses on planning to mitigate the possible risks and hazards and final component is related to disaster reduction and resilience education. However, there is a misconception among the policy actors that implementing basic safety measures in schools is solely about constructing physical infrastructure, such as sturdy buildings and fences. While infrastructure is undoubtedly crucial, focusing solely on this aspect overlooks other critical components of school safety, such as emergency preparedness plans, teacher training on safety protocols, and community engagement in safety initiatives. Without addressing these holistic aspects, the effectiveness of any safety package may be limited. Here, head teacher of one of the school says *'I do not know what the policy is about but I guess this is more related to how to keep the school safer. While talking about school safety, structure of school building comes in mind'*. He was not aware of whether this policy exists or not. While digging out further, he is not sure what makes the school building safe. Similarly, school teacher expressed that

'this is about the preparedness. It is related to preparedness of any possible disaster mainly focusing what are the basic things we should do to be safe from that disaster. It also covers what to do after the disaster in spite of cautious preparedness for example rescue and managing the residence for the people. After that it leads to the reconstruction phase.'

Here, the teacher talked about all three phases of disaster risk management i.e. preparedness, response and reconstruction but minimum school safety package does not talk about the reconstruction phase. Neither the policy talks about managing the residence for the people. So, I saw certain differences between what is written in policy and how the policy actors have understood it.

Similarly, another difference in understanding is about the sustainability. I found that policymaker understood that once safety measures are put in place, they require minimal maintenance or updates. However, ensuring ongoing safety requires continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation to changing circumstances. This includes regular drills to rehearse emergency procedures, periodic assessments of infrastructure for weaknesses or deterioration, and updates to safety protocols based on evolving risks. Neglecting the need for sustained efforts in this regard could leave schools vulnerable to unforeseen hazards. Policy also talks about the continuous allocation of resource for the school safety. Here one of the undersecretary from the ministry of education, science and technology shared

'Pillar two and three do not require huge resources as they are more related to the knowledge. Small actions may bring big impact and donor agencies are also working pillar two and three so I think pillar two and three are being implemented in comparison to pillar one. Since this is the responsibility of local government, MoEST is not allocating enough budget now'.

Here, undersecretary tries to put aside the responsibility to the local government but the actual policy clearly mentioned that keeping school safe is everyone's responsibility. In this way, I found that there is difference between what policy says and what policy actors have actually understood the policy.

Jargon vs colloquial language

Another major finding of this research is the policy uses many jargon words like 'pillar one', 'Vulnerability Capacity Assessment', 'none-structural hazards', 'Standard Operation Procedures' and so on. However, while talking to the policy actors, only the undersecretary of ministry of education used such language but the head teacher and the teacher used very colloquial language which we generally find in lay man's speech.

The policy says in introduction as *'this package envisages critical activities that the schools can manage to implement them based on the guiding principle of their*

relevance, soundness, feasibility, scalability and contextualized, in all schools in Nepal and include structural, infrastructural and non-structural measures (MoEST, 2018).’ Here, we can see lots of jargons but the school teacher expressed his understanding in a simple language as *‘keeping the things like blackboard and cupboard safely’* instead of saying *‘non-structural measures’*. Similarly, both policy document and the undersecretary used the terms *‘pillar three’* and *‘resilience education’* frequently but the school teacher used *‘extracurricular activities related to school safety’, ‘earthquake drill’* and *‘lightening drill’* to explain the same concept.

Four blinds and an elephant

According to Mubita (2021), “A secure school encompasses all measures taken to combat threats to learners, teachers, support staff and property in education environments”. However, in this research, I found that all the three layer’s policy actors understood the policy in different ways as the blind people explained the shape and size of elephant in one of the Nepali folk tale. Undersecretary who is working at ministry of education shared her understanding of policy relatively in a wider way. She told that grievance management comes under school safety where as other policy actors did not mention about it. Undersecretary shared as

‘schools have initiated the grievance management. Earlier, it was not regarded as a part of school safety but there are many organizations who are working on grievance management. There is a box in every schools where students can put their grievance and we are monitoring them so it is under school safety’.

The head teacher knew nothing about the policy rather he just guessed what the policy is about. He shared that he has never got formal information about this particular policy. So he just guessed the possible content of that package and mentioned the structural aspects like school building, railing, electricity wire of toilet etc. He did not mention anything about the school level plan. Then I asked about their current practices to make the school safe and he shared that he has been coordinating with school management committee and municipality to get fund for railing and earthquake resilient building. I asked whether they are informing the students on how to become safe in different disaster like fire, earthquake, road accident and he said no. I asked whether he has maintained any emergency contact number like ambulance, fire brigadier and local police and he said he has the number of ward office and police station only. Finally, I asked since there is a policy, how a school leader like him can implement its basic things in school and he replied that school has many things to deal with and he does not have time to care such less necessary tasks. He said

‘students are decreasing, there are no computer and science lab and I myself have to take 3 class per day so I do not have enough time to take care of all those things but if municipality organizes any such trainings I am happy to implement them.’

This shows that he is not even ready to take initiation without the formal directives from the concerned authorities like municipality, ward, education coordination committee and so on. In the same vein, school teacher's understanding is also separate than the head teacher and undersecretary. Unlike the undersecretary who talked more about the theoretical angle of the policy, school teacher shared the real scenario they are facing at school. He said

'The first challenge is related to the mindset of the stakeholder. They were not interested to develop school safety plan. Most of them shared that the earthquake is already gone and it takes so many years to come back, lightning is already gone so it is not necessary to develop plan. We convinced them hardly and develop the plan but another challenge was to implement the plan. For example, we scheduled the date for extracurricular activities related to school safety but the school did not conduct it.'

In this way, same policy was interpreted differently from three different layer of policy actors depending their level of involvement in implementation on policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the article highlights the understanding of different policy actors at various levels regarding the minimum school safety package. Findings reveal that there is no uniformity in comprehension, with some focusing solely on physical infrastructure while overlooking other critical aspects such as emergency preparedness, teacher training, and community engagement. Moreover, it was revealed that the policy actors mainly sitting at center level use the jargon words and the policy actors working into the field use day to day language. The use of jargon in policy documents creates a gap in understanding between policymakers and grassroots-level stakeholders. Additionally, varying interpretations of the policy highlight the need for better communication and coordination among stakeholders for effective implementation. Until and unless there is a uniformity of the actual interpretation of the policy text among all the stakeholders, its implementation is likely to be weak. Overall, the article underscores the importance of bridging the gap between policy formulation and grassroots-level understanding to ensure the successful implementation of school safety measures.

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