Emergency Response in Educational Policies during COVID-19 in Nepal: A Critical Review

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought chaos in education across the world, including developing countries like Nepal. To respond to this educational disruption in this South Asian country, different educational plans and policies were formulated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Government of Nepal. It is not known whether these policies were realistic and practicable, as there is no review of these documents to date. With this backdrop, this paper critically reviews the educational plans and policies that were developed to manage education during the crisis. It appraises the strengths of these policies in terms of their intent and practicalities of implementation in the given situation, and identifies gaps and challenges, and recommends some ways to realistically run the education system. The review reveals that these documents have several strengths, such as they plan to create data in terms of learners' access to resources, value self-learning and parent education, and suggest several alternative ways to resume school. Yet, there are some gaps and challenges, the identification of which can guide the effective delivery of education in Nepal in any kind of crisis period both at present and in future. This paper is expected to help policy makers to revisit the existing policies or guide them when they form future educational policies that are designed to manage education in any kinds of crisis. It is also deemed helpful for teacher educators, practitioners and other educational stakeholders to understand about the educational plans and policies formed to deal with crises.

Keywords: COVID-19, challenges, educational policies, emergency response, strengths

Background

In the history of education systems, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the largest disruption and affected nearly 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries, and in case of low and lower-middle income countries, closure of schools and other learning spaces have affected up to 99 percent of learners (United Nations, 2020). The out-of-school rate of primary education is high (up to 86 percent) in low human development index countries whereas it is low in very high human development countries (only 20 percent) (Conceição et al., 2020). The current situation has the potential to further widen the gap between children of low and high development countries. The learning space has become disembodied, and virtual not actual, for students of developing countries, affecting both student learning and organization of schools during the pandemic (Pacheco, 2020).

In the case of Nepal, until December 11 2020, 245,650 positive cases of Coronavirus were reported with 1,663 cases of COVID-related deaths (Worldometer, 2020). As the early response to this crisis, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), the Government of Nepal (GoN) issued a brief notice on March 3 2020 to conduct all the year-end examinations within March, which is the end of the academic year. Later, on 24 March, the GoN announced lockdown as the second COVID case was identified in Nepal (Center for Education and Human Resource Development [CEHRD], 2020a). At first, all the educational institutions were closed till April 27 2020, but the lockdown had to be extended further. The baby step of distance learning got a boost during COVID-19 in Nepal (Karki, 2020) although the quality of technological devices that learners use to access education is one of the concerns in developing nations such as Nepal (Shrestha, 2016). COVID-19 revealed major inequalities such as access to devices, platforms and places to do schoolwork for the learners when they are outside schools (Fullan, 2020), and it was also very visible in this small South Asian country.

Giri and Dawadi (2020) report that around 9 million school children have been affected in Nepal by the school closure due to the COVID-19 crisis. Amongst those affected, the children having internet access is 1,093,394, children with access to other media are 3,958,270, children with no access to other media are 2,357,959 and the children at risk are 995,090 (CEHRD, 2020a). There can be a higher risk of dropout of nearly 3,335,000 children in Nepal who do not have access to any media needed to support virtual learning. To respond to the current disruption in education, particularly in school education brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the GoN developed and implemented some policies over a period. It is not known whether these policies stood as strong documents to guide the practices during the pandemic. Of late, there has not been any critical review of the plans and policies that were formulated to respond to the educational chaos during the pandemic in Nepal. With an aim to fill this gap, this study critically reviews all the plans and policies that came as responses to manage education during the pandemic.

Policy Review: Theoretical Bases

Policies do not fail or succeed on their own right rather their progress depends on how they are implemented (Hudson et al., 2019). Neupane (2020) proposes a five-step framework for formulating and implementing effective education policy. The first and second steps include examining socio-cultural disparity, and the third focuses on the analysis of educational inputs. Neupane (2020) contends that it is necessary to map available resources for education spending to learn both resource gaps and demand/supply gaps. She argues that a number of concerns

should be addressed, such as identifying the timeline, necessary institutional framework and further programs to achieve the policy objectives and goals (step 4). The final step is assessing socio-economic developmental impacts of education. Although this framework seems comprehensive, it has missed out the socio-economic aspect to be examined at the first step which can substantially help policy makers to develop effective policies.

On the basis of the success factors they found in their study, Norris et al. (2014) provide suggestions to make policy effective for implementation, such as identifying the problem and the outcomes that matter most, thinking about implementation while developing the policy, being aware of and ready to respond to the wider system, staying close to the implementers, determining where and how decisions are made, building in long-term focus, and being prepared to rethink if the context changes dramatically. Highlighting the contributors to policy failures, Hudson et al. (2019) identify overly optimistic expectations, implementation in dispersed governance, inadequate collaborative policy making, and vagaries of the political cycle (focus on the short-term results) are four contributors. Long-term policies can be challenging for the government because the political will necessary to drive long-term policy making dissolves over time (Ilott et al., 2016). Hudson and their colleagues argue that the implementation difficulties of any policy are also related to the lack of collaboration in policy-making and the failure to create a common place for public problem solving. Policies formulated at the central level may face difficulties of ensuring consistency in delivery at local level (Hudson et al., 2019). In some cases, policies are formulated with many key elements left unexplained which can lead people to spend substantial time and effort as ambiguous terms need to be explained and interpreted (Weaver, 2020). Norris et al. (2014) argue that the clarity on the issue that is dealt on the policy also helps decision makers to choose during implementation particularly about where resources should be focused. The above discussion reveals that many policy analysts have proposed different models and guidelines to analyse policy formation and implementation, which will guide the analysis of the findings of this study.

Methodology

This is a policy review focused on intents and practicalities of the plans and policies formed by the GoN during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by the document analysis method, firstly, the authors went through all major policy documents that were released during the pandemic till December 2020 namely *Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020*, *Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020* and *Framework for School Operation, 2020*. These documents were retrieved from the sites of MoEST and Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD), Nepal. Bowen (2009) says that document analysis is the process of "evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed" (p. 34). The researchers of this study intended to produce the empirical knowledge based on these documents which can help researchers and educational stakeholders understand the essence of these policies. During the exploration, the focus of the authors was more on witting evidence (O'Leary, 2017), which is the content within the document, compared to the focus on latent contents of the documents such as author or creator, tone, agenda, style of the documents (O'Leary, 2017). To do so, the technique the researchers used during exploration is closer to the "interview technique" claimed by O' Leary (2017) as the authors highlighted the texts bearing some tentative questions in mind. Then, the researchers organized the information into the central questions related to intent and practicalities (Bowen, 2009). Later, they re-read those notes and arranged them under strengths, and gaps and challenges. They also went through some other documents and notices released

and issued during the pandemic by the GoN and other local bodies. O'Leary (2017) contends that how we read and what we draw from the documents will be based on our own situatedness. However, the researchers during the analysis of these documents tried to be as objective as possible in order for the document analysis outcomes to be credible and valid. The following shows the process of our review and analysis of the documents under discussion.
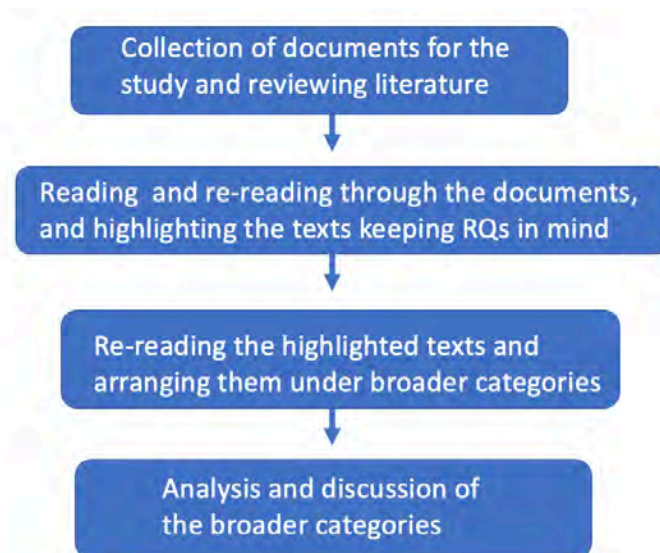

Figure 1: The research process

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are strengths of the educational policies that were/are implemented during COVID-19 in Nepal?
2. What are the gaps and challenges found in those educational policies?
3. What aspects of educational policies need to be considered to make such policies operational during any crisis contexts in a developing nation, such as Nepal?

In the following sections, the authors discuss the documents chronologically identifying their strengths, and gaps and challenges.

Findings and Discussion

Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020
The first plan brought by the government during the pandemic in Nepal is the *Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020* (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Science & Technology [GoN, MoEST], 2020a). It is a comprehensive plan that claims to list activities to manage the school education during the crisis, processes to complete the activities, timelines to carry them out and the implementers as well as supporters who will play a significant role in carrying out these tasks. One of the strengths is that it has a plan to create a record of students under five categories for the alternative learning considering learners' access to resources under five different categories: students having no access to any resources; students having access to radio/FM; students having access to television; students having access to computers but no access to Internet connection; and students having access to all kinds of resources. This was targeted to be completed by the first week of October 2020. It also planned to ascertain the distribution of textbooks to the students. Other components worth noting were students' enrolment plans, intent to send teachers to teach at the school sites, the classification of content

as self-learning or teacher supported, the development of self-learning materials in line with the curriculum, the implementation of home schooling, the development of temporary learning facilitation centres and converting them into free Wi-Fi zones and to evaluate the learners based on their context. Another crucial scheme of this action plan is to develop and disseminate some materials to deal with mental wellbeing of teachers and learners, which is hardly taken into account in Nepal (Gnawali, 2020) although the study of Mahat and Khanal (2012) report that child mental health program implemented in schools have significant positive impact on students, school environment and teaching learning activities. The study of Gautam et al. (2020) on the self-reported psychological distress during COVID-19 in Nepal equally emphasizes that there is a need of the formal body to address the appropriate mental health and psychological support response in Nepal.

Despite being an action plan, it seems that in many cases, it lacked explanation of the implementation steps on how to carry out the activities it listed. For instance, it planned to collect data in relation to the access to resources by the first week of October; nonetheless, it has remained silent on how the data will be collected. The question emerges whether it was possible to collect the data in the given timeline given the situation that there was no usual practice of data collection, and there is high prevalence of psychological distress among the Nepalese during the pandemic (Gautam et al., 2020). Norris et al. (2014) contend that the clarity on the issue is needed on any policy for the effective implementation.

The document is very ambitious in that it plans to develop the scheme to expand internet access to the schools beginning from October or November. This plan seems very relevant but unrealistic as this is a mere statement without a proper study and clearly stated action plans. It corroborates the argument of Hudson et al., (2019) that overly optimistic expectation in any policies lead to failure in the implementation. First, there needs to be a categorical specification such as, which schools from which regions should be targeted, what could be the minimum bandwidth for each school and in what ways the schools use the newly obtained Internet for facilitating teaching and learning? The breakdown of broad actions is missing in this document.

Some plans in this policy document seem completely unrealistic such as, making mobile data free while operating the learning portal of CEHRD during COVID-19. Radhakrishnan-Nair et al. (2020) argue "This will require that new servers and network hardware be set up in many provinces to handle higher traffic" (p. 21) and these actions did not seem feasible during the crisis. Nepal Economic Forum (2020) claims that the GoN has failed to build the necessary infrastructure for virtual learning during COVID-19 period.

Nonetheless, the document paved the way to design a more comprehensive action plan titled *Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020*, analysed in the next section, which helped to facilitate learning during the pandemic.

Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020
This is a primary guideline aimed at helping learners at the school level in Nepal to gain the learning objectives set by the Curriculum Development Centre for the current academic year during the time of the COVID-19 crisis (GoN, MoEST, 2020b). This guideline mandated to be implemented by the MoEST in 2020 has defined students as children who are learning formally or informally and are of school-going age groups but have not joined schools. The guideline classifies school students of Nepal into 5 categories (listed in the previous section) as stated in the *Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020*. This guideline has clearly made a broader category of learners and recommended some plans to address diversified learners in

the current crisis. Yet, there are some gaps and challenges to implementing it, the identification of which can guide the effective delivery of education in general and in the current crisis and during any kind of crisis period in future. Since this is the primary guideline supposed to address multiple educational issues during the pandemic in Nepal, the authors have given more space in this article to the discussion of this plan. In the next sections, they discuss the strengths and gaps with relevant evidences from the document.

Strengths. This guideline has specified the roles of different stakeholders such as CEHRD, Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), municipalities and rural municipalities, schools and parents to facilitate the learning during the period of the COVID-19 crisis. This is a necessary step on policy formation as Neupane (2020) asserts that it is required to understand the availability of resources and plan accordingly. This guideline also plans to collect data of learners in general and in relation to the access to learning resources in particular which can benefit to devise new educational plans and policies in future.

(५) यस दफा बमोजिम समूहगत विद्यार्थी पहिचान तथा वर्गीकरण गर्ने प्रयोजनका लागि विद्यालयले चालु शैक्षिक सत्रमा विद्यार्थीको अभिलेख तयार गरी सो अभिलेख बमोजिम विद्यार्थीको नामनामेसी, आमा, बाबुको नाम, ठेगाना, सम्पर्क नं., विद्यार्थीको समूहकृत वर्ग र स्रोत साधनको पहुँचको अवस्था समेतको विवरण खुलाई सम्बन्धित स्थानीय तहलाई उपलब्ध गराउनु पर्नेछ ।

Translation:

5. Guided by this clause, for the purpose of identifying and classifying students into different groups, in this academic year, the schools will collect students' names, names of their parents, addresses, contact numbers, groupwise classification of students, their access to resources, and keep record of the learners and submit those data to local level.

Figure 2: Excerpt from the Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020 (p. 2)

Clause 5 of the Guideline above requires the schools to collect/maintain data of students submitted at a local level. This holds schools responsible for the data and the local bodies to manage them further which ultimately increases the coordination between the local bodies and the schools.

It also stresses that there should be a separate learning facilitation for the differently-abled children. This consideration to include them in learning during the crisis is positive from an inclusivity perspective. Human Rights Nepal (n.d.) argues that many children with disabilities do not get appropriate kind of support to learn and do well in schools in Nepal as a result, they are deprived of quality education.

Another positive aspect of this guideline is to require a head teacher to enter the data of students into the Integrated Educational Management Information System (IEMIS), even though the availability of a functionally effective system in all community schools is still questionable. This provision not only ensures that the data are entered in the system for action and analysis, but it also impacts in the long run the capacity building of the schools which is consistent with the argument of Norris and their colleagues (2014) who contend that one of the factors of effective policy is its focus on long run.

Group management of the learners for the facilitation of learning is an appropriate plan, and involving parents in the teaching-learning process is another good move in this guideline. Parental involvement was also briefly stated in the previous *Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020*. This provision helps in supporting students as per their learning needs. In the past, the Government was rigid with regard to the education regulations, but now it has shown flexibility in different ways as it has valued home schooling, online learning and promoted self-learning. Besides the dormant role of parents, this guideline has also delineated some of their roles for the day-to-day learning.

In previous years, despite availability of some digital resources, there were teachers who would not access those materials to use them in regular teaching and learning (Rana et al., 2018); nonetheless, at this time, a large number of teachers are trying to access digital materials to engage learners in this crisis context. In this regard, this guideline has also stated that teachers can access materials from the different sources such as www.learning.cehrd.edu.np, www.youtube.com/ncedvirtual, www.moecdc.gov.np, www.doe.gov.np.

Furthermore, this guideline has given some room for the adjustment of courses rather than completion, which is a departure from the former practices based on a rigid structure (Acharya, 2016) that focus on completing the courses in each academic year without focusing on students' learning. Now, the teachers will be able to adjust the contents based upon the needs and practicalities, and also critically think about what works and what may not in the crisis period.

Gaps and challenges. Despite having some strengths, this guideline has some gaps and challenges that may compromise the effectiveness of its implementation as intended. The guideline has stated that in the current academic year, in order to classify the students in different groupwise categories, the schools should keep the records of their names, parents' names, addresses, contact details, their groupwise categories and their access to resources, and submit them to the local level. The question emerges here: how can all schools keep records at this time, as there is no school physically running (Shrestha, 2020) and not all schools have been able to reach out to all the children (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] Nepal, 2020)? The guideline also states that the schools can use the data collected in the previous year and provide details. Again, the question is if the schools have collected data in relation to their access to technology in the previous years as there was no consideration of such issues earlier. This confusion and complexity might lead the local level not to take the job seriously, which accords with the argument of Hudson et al. (2019), that is to classify the students as there is no clear action plan delineated by this guideline.

The digital divide, which was already considered as a challenge by the *National Education Policy 2019* (GoN, MoEST, 2019), seems to continue defeating the purpose of this guideline that it may further augment the digital divide in the long run. A mere division of learners is not sufficient. The following sub-clause seems to have totally favoured the learners having access to all kinds of resources.

६. **विद्यार्थीले आफ्नो रुचि र प्राथमिकता अनुसार अध्ययन गर्न पाउनेः** दफा ५ बमोजिमका
Nirdesika (page 8 of 19)
कार्यक्रमहरूमध्ये एकभन्दा बढी कार्यक्रममा पहुँच हुने विद्यार्थीले आफ्नो रुचि र प्राथमिकता
अनुसारको कार्यक्रम छनोट गर्न सक्नेछ ।

Translation:

6. **Students can learn as per their interest and priority** : Amongst the programmes listed in clause 5, the students having access to more than one programmes can choose the programme as per their interest and priority.

Figure 3: Excerpt from the Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020 (p. 7)

The issue that persists here is the equitable provision to other groups of learners who have access to limited or almost no resources, and the guideline seems to have remained silent on it.

Under clause 19, it also states that as per necessity, resources will be made available by producing them in local languages which seems to be a good move as it has also considered the use of local languages to develop resources which can help learners to have a better understanding of concepts that are dealt in their languages. However, there remains a procedural confusion. Since the guideline has not delineated procedural aspects, the mere statement seems a kind of comfort word for the policy activists who might advocate use of local languages in teaching-learning resources.

The plan to require a head teacher of the school to enter the data of students into the IEMIS is a good idea. Nevertheless, there are layers of confusions to be unpacked, which can lead stakeholders to spend substantial time and effort to clarify confusions (Weaver, 2020). Is such a system effectively functioning in all schools? If not, what steps can be taken to build such a system?

This guideline mentions that there will be some actions towards arranging the required budget to create and manage a unified education portal, establishing and managing educational television channels, developing electronic resources, technology and devices, arranging alternative means to power, and creating virtual lab, E-cloud lab and E-library. Norris et al. (2014) claim that obtaining clarity on any concerns that are stated in any policy is one of the important steps to make it effective; however, in this guideline, it is not clear what percentage of budget will be there and who the contributors are.

(ग) एकीकृत शिक्षा पोर्टलको निर्माण तथा सञ्चालन, शैक्षिक टेलिभिजन च्यानल स्थापना र सञ्चालन, विद्युतीय शिक्षण सामग्री विकास, अनलाइन प्रविधि तथा उपकरण, विद्युतको वैकल्पिक व्यवस्था, भर्चुअल ल्याब, ई-क्लाउड प्रयोगशाला र इ-लाइब्रेरी स्थापना, खरिद तथा सञ्चालनका लागि आवश्यक बजेट व्यवस्थापन सम्बन्धी कार्यहरू गर्ने,

Translation:

c. There will be actions to manage the required budget for developing and managing unified education portal, establishing and managing educational channel, developing digital teaching materials, online technology and devices, managing alternative sources to electricity, establishing virtual laboratory, E-cloud laboratory and E-library

Figure 4: Excerpt from the Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020 (p. 10)

It has also stated that teachers can access materials from the different sources such as www.learning.cehrid.edu.np, www.youtube.com/ncedvirtual, www.moecdc.gove.np and www.doe.gov.np. The issue is if there was any form of teachers' engagement when these learning portals are created and updated, or if there is any plan to engage teachers. If it is purely top-down production, the materials available in these resources can be only in a form repository as teachers may not use them, having found that most of the materials available there are not context-appropriate. The Clause 8 sub-clause 5 claims,

(५) स्थानीय तह वा विद्यालयमा विकास र प्रयोग भएका सामग्रीहरु स्थानीय तह तथा विद्यालयले आफ्नो वेबसाइटमा अपलोड गर्न सक्नेछन् ।

Translation:

5. The resources that are developed and used at local level or schools can be uploaded in the sites of local level or schools.

Figure 5: Excerpt from the Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020 (p. 8)

It is a good policy to upload some materials created and used by local levels and schools to the school's site or the site created at the local level. Nonetheless, by just uploading the resources

at local level limits the teachers' contribution in creating the resources which can have a potential to contribute nationally. It also shows that local teachers' contributions are not valued, and there seems to be very much expert-centric practice bypassing the roles of local teachers who indeed have the ability to design context-appropriate materials. Shrestha (in press) argues that the digital materials developed by the teachers will be context-sensitive and can be included in a centrally created digital repository.

As schools remained closed for a long period, and the "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020) could not be as effective as face-to-face and also the positive cases of COVID-19 were dropping continuously, in November, MoEST planned to reopen the schools. They brought out the new *Framework for School Operation, 2020* which is discussed in the coming section.

Framework for School Operation, 2020
The recent *Framework for School Operation, 2020* (GoN, MoEST, 2020c) in the context of COVID-19 implemented by the MoEST has clearly delineated the preparation strategies that the institutions should adopt before reopening the schools such as disinfecting the schools that were used for quarantine, arranging help-desks, consulting with local authorities that include parents, the members of children's clubs about the possibility of reopening schools and so on. The strength of this framework is that it has also created a checklist to measure if the schools are safe to open. Interestingly, it has nowhere mentioned the protocol of transportation used for the students who commute to and from their schools. Especially, a number of private schools that have a large number of commuters will be struggling to resume their schools as there is no clear policy about students' transportation in this framework. Worse, the students who use public transports can be exposed to vehicles, that may not follow the safety protocols for transportation (Ojha, 2020). It reveals that the collaboration with local stakeholders is missing while framing the policy, which can potentially lead to the policy failure (Hudson et al., 2019).

This framework provides the authority to the local bodies that comprise parents, schools, children's clubs and municipalities or rural municipalities which can decide the reopening of the schools depending upon the local context. It is in line with the assertion of Norris et al. (2014) that other stakeholders have to be brought into policymaking to make it effective. This framework firmly maintains that based on the risk of COVID-19 expansion, available physical resources and students' number in a school, the local bodies will help implement one of the following alternatives: running all the classes at once; running classes in different shifts; running classes reducing the actual time; running classes on alternate days; and running classes by dividing the students of the same class. These alternatives have helped local bodies to consider the options to resume schools in their regions.

This framework also states the role of a school management committee to help children be psychologically prepared to join the school. It equally argues that the local bodies will liaise with the organizations working for students with disabilities and the parents to create a favourable situation for the return of students with disabilities or additional needs; however, the policy has not clearly stated how local bodies will achieve it and where they get resources required to complete these tasks. Once the local bodies access the data about students with disabilities or additional needs, how can they provide learners with resources to help them continue learning? Will liaison alone with the organizations working for students with disabilities or additional needs and parents suffice to solve this issue? These issues are not clearly addressed in the framework.

(घ) विद्यालय सञ्चालनका लागि स्थानीय स्रोतको पहिचान र परिचालन गर्ने ।

Local resources will be identified and managed to run schools.

Figure 6: Excerpt from the Framework for School Operation, 2020 (p. 15)

The above is a very broad statement from the framework that talks about the identification and use of local resources to run schools. The way the local resources are identified and managed by local bodies is not explicitly addressed. Norris et al. (2014) assert that clarity on a policy helps decision makers find out where resources should be targeted. It can be a case that the local bodies may keep on waiting for the clear direction and decisions of the federal or provincial bodies which is usually a practice in Nepal.

Based on the emergency educational policies implemented during this crisis, there were some new developments to deal with crises such as creation of a Learning Portal (https://learning.cehrd.edu.np/) by CEHRD, actions to provide free data for the students from disadvantaged communities, circulation of *Procedures for Communication Networking in Schools* (CEHRD, 2020b) to establish a closer user group and so on. Some of these new initiatives also had some issues which are briefly discussed below.

Issues on Initiatives Driven by Educational Policies During the Emergency
The first ever learning portal was developed by CEHRD during the pandemic, which is believed to have helped a large majority of the students and teachers. It comprises the lessons intended as self-learning materials for students of different levels. If utilized as intended, the materials appeared to be effective for maintaining the learning of the children during the emergency period. The authors question the sensitivity of the selection and use of a picture (Figure 7) which appears on the homepage of the learning portal. It is, of course, hard to understand the rationale behind using this picture on the homepage of the learning portal. Questions may arise such as, is the use of the picture on the homepage to show how curious a little girl is for learning which potentially can motivate other learners as well? Or is it to convey the visitors of this site the message that despite being from a low socioeconomic background, this girl is still interested in learning?

Figure 7: The landing page of the Learning Portal that includes a little girl's image

The girl in the picture seems to be from a state-owned school and from low socio-economic background as in general underprivileged students go to state-owned schools in Nepal (Mathema, 2007). Buckingham et al. (2013) argue that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds begin their schools with low literacy, and it is likely that they can be weak in reading when they progress through school too. So, it can be assumed that using a picture that portrays a particular socio-economic status might make such a group feel that the content used in this portal are equally suitable for them. However, a learning portal is not a report to have a picture used to depict a particular group of school children because politicisation of the page, if it is done taking account of socio-economic status, can remain an issue. Undoubtedly, in this age of ICT, the meaning of any artifact can be conveyed using multiple modes, for example, using texts, pictures, videos and other semiotic resources. In this case, if the picture used in the portal cannot help visitors to construct a meaning, CEHRD may need to reconsider this. In addition, the issue here is also of the acknowledgement to this little girl whose picture is used in this portal, for instance, who is this girl and what is the meaning of using her picture here? This brief information could have been mentioned as a note on the site.

It is obvious that during a crisis or an emergency, there is a very limited time to respond to any issues (Herman, 1969). In many cases, the attempts made to respond to an emergency seem random which, of course, calls for proper care and attention. For example, while uploading the notices related to the schedule of airing or telecasting of educational audio and video materials on the site of the CEHRD, the notices had some missing information regarding dates due to poor scanning. In the notice below (Figure 8) issued by CEHRD, the extreme left-hand column (circled in green) which mentions the dates and days of telecasting audio-visual materials is blurry. Educational television and radio broadcasts are important communication means between educators and students when managing internet connectivity is challenging (David et al., 2020).

Figure 8: Unclear notice uploaded in the site of CEHRD

To help learners to join online learning, CEHRD circulated *Procedures for Communication Networking in Schools* on December 18, 2020. This document aims to create a closer user group in schools by setting up communication networking between students and teachers. As per this document, a closer user group is a systemic online networking between students, teachers, parents and school officials created for learning facilitation. It states that the available services related to such groups will be cut off completely or partially once the schools run physically. This provision seems impressionistic as it was approved by MoEST on December 01 and circulated by CEHRD 18 days later when many schools resumed physically. *The Framework for School Operation, 2020* which has guided to resume schools physically, was approved on November 05, nearly a month before the *Procedures* was circulated. Actually, the *Procedures* should have been implemented much earlier to assist the learners engage in online learning by setting up a closer user group. Although the document seems comprehensive, its arrival at this point of time seems the relevant effort made at an irrelevant period.

Lastly, although the issue the authors are pointing out below is not the initiative based on educational policies developed during emergency, it has a direct implication on the formulation of emergency plans and actions. It is unfortunate to note that the MoEST still has not published, let alone updated, the reports and figures related to education on its website even though they have created a separate tab for it. For example, when a visitor visits the site of the MoEST, particularly the pages titled "national education in figures, reports and curriculum", the following message pops up:
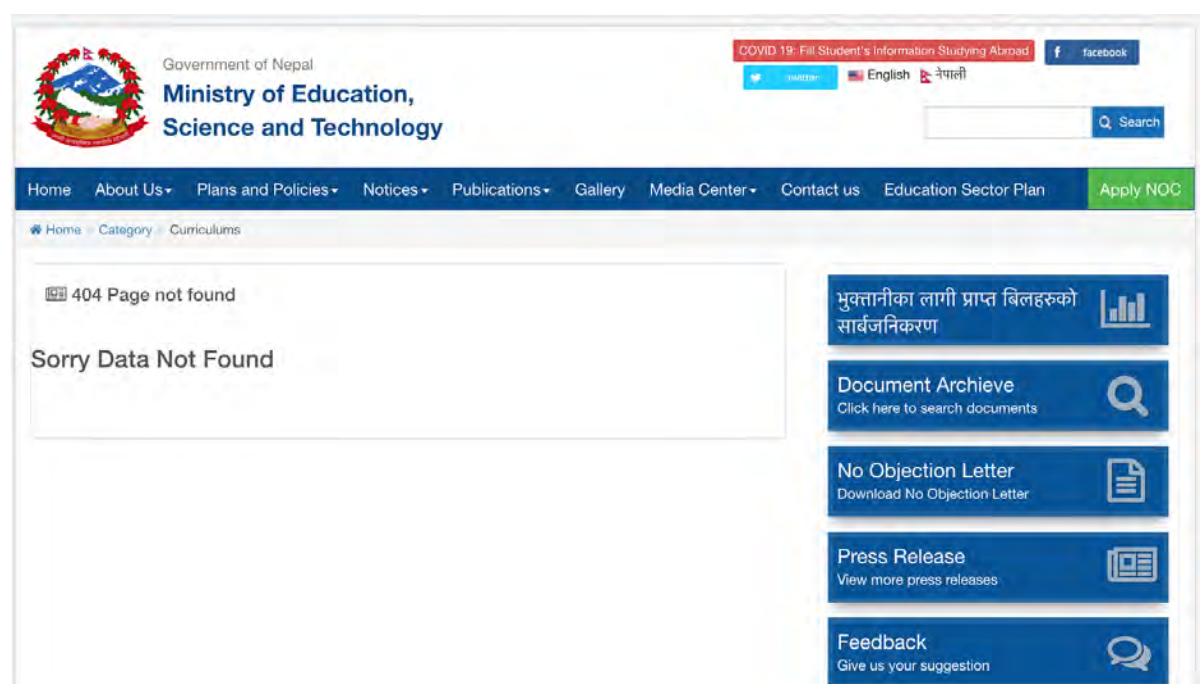

Figure 9: Screenshot of the website of MoEST, GoN

It is high time that the authorities like ministries updated information on their sites which will be useful to manage emergency situations and develop any educational plan in future.

d'Orville (2020) argues that the disruption brought by this pandemic "offers the opportunity for all actors in the education sector to rethink the system and discuss how to educate future generations" (p. 13). All the educational policies developed to respond to the current pandemic are first of their kind. These policies aimed at addressing the pandemic did acknowledge some

novel aspects of education. These policies have also signalled a transformation in education such as valuing self-learning, redefining traditional assessment, focusing on a parental role in education, the last of which was highly neglected in the past, and looking for broader collaboration with all possible educational stakeholders. However, in many cases, it seems that these educational policies are still one-way and have a top-down orientation. They lack dialogues with local stakeholders of education, and they seem to have been prepared without enough homework and consultation with stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, school heads, learners and also community members. Although the pandemic times were unusual, enough local consultation could have been possible as teachers, school managers, parents, local community members and learners could be available virtually. As a result, the emergency response could have been much more solid. It is observed that many students are left behind during this crisis (Dawadi et al., 2020), and the gap between private and public schools in managing education during this crisis widened largely (Pandey, 2020).

Recommendations

Based on the researchers' observation as teacher educators and the analysis of the above educational policies, some recommendations are made. First, educational policies need to be dialogic and bi-directional thereby getting enough inputs from local educational stakeholders so that the implementers of these policies can ensure that they fit to the local context.

Second, the collection of data about students that includes access to resources is a must during their enrolment, and it has to be frequently updated. This can be done by developing a specific form that students can fill it up if they can write on their own or parents can do so on behalf of younger students.

Third, the *Student Learning Facilitation Guideline* is silent on promoting learners from no access category to the category having some and further to the category having full access to resources. There should be plans to promote current learners from the level, that is learners having access to no resources to the other level and so on. Fourth, to require the headteachers to enter the data of students into the IEMIS, there should be a clear guideline to develop such a system at a local level or in the school, and equally, there should be the plan to mentor the headteachers to enable them to work on any digital platforms.

Fifth, it is a good initiative of the student learning facilitation guideline to give some flexibility to teachers to adjust curriculum in the current setting rather than completing courses. In any future policy, there should be a provision which ensures that teachers gain the autonomy to decide course content so that the learning objectives indicated by the curriculum are met in a comfortable and realistic manner instead of merely completing the course for the sake of completion.

Sixth, the guideline has not mentioned anything about adding resources generated by teachers if they are found useful. Adding resources built by teachers to a portal also means valuing teachers' expertise which can help build resources that can be more contextual. Therefore, future plans and policies should consider teachers' expertise and recognize them nationally.
Seventh, as the guideline mentions, parent education which can help them to instigate to involve their children in learning, the nature and role of parent education should be clearly stated. Also, there should be a study that explores if any parent education is practised or designed to practise at any level.

Eighth, in the guideline, there is no timeline to execute the specific action plans, and it has very limited actions. As a result, it might fail to direct the stakeholders to carry out their roles effectively within the relevant period of time. Therefore, either this guideline needs to clearly describe the timeline or the upcoming policies should indicate the timelines for each action plan.

Lastly, the data such as Education in Figures and other relevant educational reports should be made available in the MoEST or CEHRD sites, and they should be timely updated. In addition, when the key information is disseminated through the official sites, they have to be reviewed for clarity both in content and presentation.

Conclusion

The implementation of all the educational policies to manage education in a crisis situation is indeed a praiseworthy move of the CEHRD and MoEST, the Government of Nepal. The policy documents the authors reviewed are novel in many cases and present landmark plans. They validate self-learning and online learning and emphasize collection of data of learners in relation to their access to resources to assist teaching and learning. They also accentuate parent education to bring parents into a teaching and learning process. Despite having these strengths, these policies which seem to have been formulated with little examination of the situation and without clear directions for implementing the actions also have some issues. One of the major educational policies, the *Guideline* exhibits overly optimistic intents coupled with ambiguity. Further, the procedural aspects to accomplish certain tasks or action plans are missing most times. There are gaps on how the stipulated activities can be executed in terms of budget and other arrangements.

Based on the critical observation on the policies in relation to the current crisis situation, the authors recommend some steps that policymakers can adopt while forming a new policy or revisiting any existing policy related to education. In the meantime, it is also expected that this paper also informs other stakeholders understand and explore the current Nepalese education system. This paper is purely a document analysis, and it does not include the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders on the implementation. Therefore, a further exploration on how educational stakeholders interact with these policies can yield equally interesting insights.

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